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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	01/13 More states, cities ban homeless camps
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/01/13/homelessness-us-more-tent-cities-banned/11024116002/
GIST	As the number of people experiencing homelessness increases across the country, more cities and states have passed laws making it illegal to live out of tents and cars or sleep in public spaces.

More than 100 jurisdictions have had such bans on the books for years, [according to the National Homelessness Law Center](#). In recent months, high-profile measures have been approved targeting homelessness in many western U.S. cities and across entire states.

CONTEXT: Federal data shows [582,462 people were experiencing homelessness](#) on a single night in January 2022. Experts warn more people will enter homelessness as housing costs increase, as has been the case for decades in cities such as [New York](#) City and much of California.

If visible, unsheltered homelessness continues to grow, city leaders will have an easier time passing measures advocates say criminalize basic needs such as sleep and sheltering oneself, Eric Tars, legal director for the National Homelessness Law Center, told USA TODAY.

"The danger is that the worse the housing situation gets, the more people we see on the streets, the more will be the push for these punitive policies," Tars said.

These states and cities have recently passed laws making it illegal to live in tents or sleep on public property:

Missouri bans sleeping in parks

On Jan. 1, a [statewide ban](#) on sleeping on state-owned land went into effect in Missouri, making it a misdemeanor to sleep in public spaces such as parks or under bridges.

Experts say Missouri's law is concerning because it covers the state and adds pressure on top of municipal bans.

It's wrong to assume people experiencing homelessness can just leave and go to another state, Tars said. People have an "assumption" that "homeless people are infinitely mobile and they'll go somewhere else," Tars said. "But most people, contrary to this notion of vagrancy and transience, are homeless in the community where they were once housed."

Missouri's law also restricts state funding for permanent housing, a model taken from template legislation created by the conservative Cicero Institute, [according to the Pew Research Center](#).

"To take funding away from housing that has the appropriate resources attached to it is devastating, problematic and perpetuates the issue of homelessness," said Kathy Connors, executive director of Gateway180 shelter in St. Louis. She added that people experiencing homelessness who are displaced from rural areas are forced to seek temporary services only available in cities, which is straining the system.

Tennessee makes it a felony to live in a tent

In July, Tennessee became the first state to make [it a felony](#) to live in a tent or sleep on state land. Statewide bans have been introduced in recent years by legislators in five other states, [Pew says](#).

"Policies like this are making homelessness worse," Tars said, because arrest, jail time and a criminal record put up steep barriers to employment, securing an apartment and accessing social services.

Portland, Oregon, bans tent living

The City Council in Portland, Oregon, voted in November [to approve a plan to ban living in tents](#) and will shift people living in encampments into [six city-sanctioned mass encampment sites](#) capped at 250 people.

The measure includes plans to build 20,000 additional affordable housing units and would eventually require everyone living on the streets to move into shelters, [Oregon Public Broadcasting reported](#). The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon [sent the Portland City Council a letter](#) warning the new measure could be unlawful. Last month, the civil rights group [sued the city of Phoenix over a similar ban](#), resulting in a temporary block from a federal judge.

Oregon's recently elected Gov. Tina Kotek started her term this week by [declaring a state of emergency for parts of the state](#) that have seen huge increases in unsheltered homelessness, including Portland.

Washoe County, Nevada, bans living in cars

In December, Washoe County Commissioners in Nevada voted 3-2 to consider an [ordinance](#) to ban camping in tents or vehicles and storing personal items in public when it poses "significant harm to any person, or public area." Violators could be charged with a misdemeanor or a \$500 fine. Within the county, Reno and Sparks already had similar ordinances in place.

In 2021, 25% of youth experiencing homelessness served by the Eddy House shelter in Reno lived on the streets, CEO Trevor Macaluso told USA TODAY. He added people displaced by sweeps in Reno and Sparks usually relocate their encampment somewhere else in the city, making the bans ineffective.

Los Angeles bans some homeless tent cities

A City Council-approved ban on tent living in certain areas was [expanded in August 2022](#) to prohibit encampments within 500 feet of schools and daycare centers after teachers and parents complained students couldn't access nearby sidewalks.

School administrators have said the ban isn't always enforced by the city and police, [according to EdSource](#), an outlet covering education in California.

More recently, the mayors of Los Angeles and Long Beach and Los Angeles County declared [states of emergency over the homeless crisis](#) aimed at speeding up services to reduce and prevent homelessness.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Rifts emerge Russia military command
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-politics-government-moscow-f2e3f238c9d8ea294e0ed8b1905caba4?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=TopNews&utm_campaign=posit ion_05
GIST	<p>As Russian troops wage a ferocious house-to-house fight for control of strongholds in eastern Ukraine, a parallel battle is unfolding in the top echelons of military power in Moscow, with President Vladimir Putin reshuffling his top generals while rival camps try to win his favor.</p> <p>The fighting for the salt mining town of Soledar and the nearby city of Bakhmut has highlighted a bitter rift between the Russian Defense Ministry leadership and Yevgeny Prigozhin, a rogue millionaire whose private military force known as the Wagner Group has played an increasingly visible role in Ukraine.</p> <p>Putin's shakeup of the military brass this week was seen as a bid to show that the Defense Ministry still has his support and is in charge as the troubled conflict nears the 11-month mark.</p> <p>Prigozhin rushed Wednesday to declare that his mercenary force had captured Soledar, arguing that the prize was won exclusively by Wagner. The Defense Ministry has challenged that characterization — describing action by airborne troops and other forces in the battle — and on Friday claimed credit for taking the town. A Ukrainian army spokesman denied that, saying fighting in Soledar continued.</p> <p>The 61-year-old Prigozhin, who was known as "Putin's chef" for his lucrative catering contracts and was indicted in the U.S. for meddling in the 2016 presidential election, has expanded his assets to include Wagner, as well as mining and other spheres. He has scathingly criticized the military brass for blunders in Ukraine, saying Wagner was more efficient than regular troops.</p> <p>He has found a powerful ally in Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has deployed elite troops from his southern Russian region to fight in Ukraine and also assailed the military leadership and the Kremlin for being too soft and indecisive.</p>

While both have pledged loyalty to Putin, their public attacks on his top generals openly challenged the Kremlin's monopoly on such criticism, something that Russia's tightly controlled political system hadn't seen before.

In the reshuffle announced Wednesday, the Defense Ministry said the head of the General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, was named the new chief of Russian forces in Ukraine, while the former top commander there, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, was demoted to Gerasimov's deputy after only three months on the job.

The Washington-based Institute of the Study of War saw the reshuffle as an attempt by the Kremlin to "reassert the primacy of the Russian Ministry of Defense in an internal Russian power struggle," weaken the influence of its foes, and send a signal to Prigozhin and others to reduce their criticism.

Prigozhin and Kadyrov have repeatedly criticized Gerasimov, the main architect of the Russian operation in Ukraine, and held him responsible for military defeats while praising Surovikin.

Russian troops were forced to retreat from Kyiv after a botched attempt to capture the Ukrainian capital in the opening weeks of the war. In the fall, they hastily pulled back from the northeastern Kharkiv region and the southern city of Kherson under the brunt of a swift Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Surovikin directed the retreat from Kherson, the only regional center captured by Russia, and was credited for shoring up command and increasing discipline in the ranks. But a Ukrainian missile strike on Jan. 1 in the eastern town of Makiivka killed scores of Russian troops and tainted his image.

Political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya observed that Gerasimov's appointment marked yet another attempt by Putin to resolve his military problems by shaking up the brass.

"He is trying to reshuffle the pieces and is therefore giving chances to those who he finds persuasive," she wrote. "But in reality, the problem is not with the people, but with the tasks at hand."

Stanovaya argued that Gerasimov could have asked for "carte blanche in the heat of verbal battles against the background of some very tense discussions." For Putin, "this is maneuvering, a tug-of-war between Surovikin (and sympathizers like Prigozhin) and Gerasimov," she added.

Gerasimov, who began his military career as a Soviet army tank officer in the 1970s, has been chief of the General Staff since 2012 and was seen at the start of the conflict in February sitting next to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at a very long table with Putin. His appointment to directly lead the forces in Ukraine drew stinging comments from some Russian hawks.

Viktor Alksnis, a retired Soviet air force colonel who spearheaded botched attempts to preserve the USSR in 1991, noted that Gerasimov had overseen the action in Ukraine even before his appointment.

"This decision reflects the understanding by our political and military leadership that the special military operation has failed and none of its goals has been fulfilled in nearly a year of fighting," Alksnis wrote on his messaging app channel. "Replacing Surovikin with Gerasimov will change nothing."

Mark Galeotti, who specializes in Russian military and security affairs at University College, London, said the appointment handed Gerasimov "the most poisoned of chalices" as he now will bear direct responsibility for any more setbacks.

"Gerasimov is hanging by a thread," Galeotti said in a commentary on Twitter. "He needs some kind of win, or a career ends in ignominy. This may well suggest some kinds of escalation."

Galeotti also warned that frequent reshuffling of Russia's generals could erode allegiance in the officer corps.

“If you keep appointing, rotating, burning your (relative) stars, setting unrealistic expectations, arbitrarily demoting them, that’s not going to win loyalty,” he said.

Prigozhin, meanwhile, has taken advantage of military setbacks in Ukraine to expand his clout by making the Wagner Group a pivotal element of the Russian fighting force, augmenting the regular army that has suffered a heavy attrition.

Ukrainian officials alleged Wagner contractors have suffered massive losses in the fighting in Soledar and Bakhmut, advancing “on the bodies of their own comrades.”

Once convicted of assault and robbery, for which he served time in prison, Prigozhin in recent months went on a tour of Russia’s sprawling network of penal colonies to recruit inmates to join Wagner’s forces to fight in Ukraine in exchange for pardons.

He recently released a video showing about 20 convicts allowed to leave the ranks of fighters after a half-year on the front line, while also making clear that anyone breaking ranks will face brutal punishment.

Footage posted in the fall showed a Wagner contractor being beaten to death with a sledgehammer after allegedly defecting to the Ukrainian side. Despite public outrage and demands to investigate the incident, authorities have turned a blind eye to it.

Observers have warned that by giving Prigozhin a free hand to run Wagner as a private army governed by medieval-style rules, the government has effectively planted dangerous seeds of possible upheaval.

“In the end, there is chaos and the expansion of violence — extrajudicial and illegal,” predicted Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst with the Carnegie Endowment.

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HEADLINE	01/12 LA County Covid deaths new winter record
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/la-county-covid-19-deaths-hit-a-new-winter-high-why/ar-AA16hQRd
GIST	<p>The number of COVID-19 deaths reported weekly in Los Angeles County has hit the highest point of the season, underscoring the continued deadly risks of a disease that has ripped through the community for nearly three years.</p> <p>L.A. County recorded 164 COVID-19 deaths for the seven-day period that ended Wednesday, a new high that exceeds the summer peak of 122 deaths for the week that ended Aug. 6. That tally was the worst in 10 months. The rolling weekly death tally declined slightly for the week that ended Thursday, to 163.</p> <p>"Deaths are high, and it's really upsetting," L.A. County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said Thursday. Nationally, many more people are still dying from COVID-19 — about 36,000 since early October — than the flu — estimated to be about 14,000 over the same period.</p> <p>But the distressing development comes even as other metrics show a relatively promising picture. L.A. County's latest death tally is a fraction of last winter's maximum, when 513 deaths were reported for the week that ended Feb. 9.</p> <p>The number of coronavirus-positive patients hospitalized statewide and in L.A. County has remained substantially lower than last winter and is showing early signs of decreasing from a potential early winter peak.</p> <p>A feared COVID-19 wave that officials warned could crest following travel and gatherings over the winter holiday season has also failed to materialize. Case rates in L.A. County and across California have fallen in recent weeks, as have coronavirus levels in wastewater.</p>

COVID-19 "did seem relatively flat over the holidays," State Epidemiologist Dr. Erica Pan said during [a webinar](#) Tuesday, and officials are hopeful "we're out of the woods and out of the worst for this winter season."

Ferrer also expressed optimism that cases are declining. L.A. County reported 1,857 cases a day for the week that ended Thursday, down 19% from the prior week. On a per capita basis, that's 129 cases a week for every 100,000 residents. A rate of 100 or more is considered high.

The peak rate this fall and winter was 272 cases a week for every 100,000 residents, recorded the first week of December. Over the summer, cases peaked at a much higher level: 476 a week for every 100,000 residents.

The California Department of Public Health [regularly estimates](#) the effective reproductive number of the coronavirus. For roughly the last month, that figure has been below 1.0 in L.A. County, which indicates transmission is either stable or decreasing.

"We don't know how the upcoming months will look in terms of COVID," Ferrer said. "We know the pandemic's not over. However, we have likely entered a new phase, in part because of the tools now available to blunt the impact of COVID and in part because of the choices people in L.A. County are making."

"My hope is certainly that we continue to report lower numbers and that transmission is significantly lowered in the weeks ahead," Ferrer added.

Still, the recent increase in deaths is concerning. L.A. County has seen more weekly COVID-19 deaths this winter than last summer, despite having significantly fewer coronavirus cases officially reported.

One obvious culprit is the continued proliferation of at-home tests, the results of which are not reliably disclosed to public health authorities. The extent of this reporting gap is impossible to know, but some officials estimate the number of infections is roughly five times the official counts.

The county's autumn low was 43 COVID-19 deaths in the first week of November, which rose to 153 for the week that ended Dec. 23. Weekly deaths temporarily declined but then rose after winter break, posting new seasonal highs this week.

It's unclear why deaths are higher than in the summer, and Ferrer said the county will probably have to review medical records to see what trends emerge. One possibility is that people dying from COVID-19 more recently were also sick with other respiratory viruses, such as flu and [RSV](#), that weren't circulating as widely earlier.

Another explanation could be that older residents are more vulnerable because they are far removed from a prior infection or vaccine dose. Only about 38% of eligible county residents 65 and older have gotten the [updated bivalent booster](#) — available since September — a figure Ferrer called "sobering."

"We believe that we could prevent more deaths, certainly more hospitalizations as well, amongst older people if we could [increase the rate of uptake](#) on the bivalent boosters," she said.

Older residents are also more likely to have underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, Ferrer noted.

It's also possible that the strains that are circulating now are causing very mild illness for most people, "but for older people, and people who have serious underlying health conditions, [it could be] leading to more severe illness."

One thing is certain, though: Older and poor residents are being hit especially hard by COVID-19 deaths, according to county data.

People 80 and older are nearly five times as likely to die than those 65 to 79. And people in the latter age group are five times as likely to die than those 50 to 64, according to county data for the three-month period that ended Jan. 3.

"This emphasizes the extra risks that older age groups face. And it does underscore the importance of protections against COVID-19, especially if you're around people who are at risk of more severe illness, and your risk ... of transmitting to someone older," Ferrer said.

That California encountered a COVID-19 surge that's [considerably milder](#) than the prior two winters is promising.

But more study is needed to understand why. "My sense is that we have more immunity that's really helping us particularly avoid hospitalizations for lots and lots of people," Ferrer said. The increased immunity includes the more than 80% of residents who have completed their primary vaccination series, including people who have received one or more booster shots.

Ferrer also said she thought more people were taking preventive measures than a few months ago. "I see a lot more people wearing masks, certainly on airplanes," Ferrer said, recounting that on a flight she was on, 1 in 3 passengers were masked.

But the next few months are still uncertain.

Officials have warned that the rise of a new coronavirus subvariant could threaten to reverse trends, as has happened several times.

The [Omicron subvariant XBB.1.5](#), perhaps the most infectious strain yet, has gained a foothold in California — and its spread could send case counts climbing.

"It has a relatively high growth rate advantage. It does have this mutation that has even more immune evasion," Pan said of [XBB.1.5](#). "So we do expect it will gradually become the more predominant strain in California."

The new subvariant's implications remain unclear, Ferrer said.

"I think the question on just about everyone's mind is how concerned should we be about XBB.1.5? I suggest we should be cautious. It's a new strain. It spreads rapidly and it can evade prior immunity. However, I don't think anyone has a clear picture yet of what the impacts will be," Ferrer said.

Some areas have seen hospital admissions rise seemingly in concert with proliferation of the variant, but that hasn't been the case everywhere.

"There's not yet clear data or patterns," she said. "And it may be that XBB.1.5 doesn't fit into the patterns that we're used to seeing."

There's also the [continued risk of long COVID](#), an array of persistent and sometimes disabling symptoms that can linger for months or years after infection, which is expected to be a public health threat for some time. The threat of long COVID is one reason health officials say it's important to take reasonable steps to avoid infection.

Ferrer said 5% to 10% of people who have been infected with the coronavirus may end up needing long-term care, "and that will have implications for all of us."

	"We worry a lot about long COVID, and we track all of the studies. It's very real for millions of people across this country who are debilitated by the symptoms that they continue to experience," Ferrer said.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Covid winter surge: hospitals struggling
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2023/01/12/covid-winter-surge/
GIST	<p>As the United States enters its third full covid winter, a top administration official is warning that the permanence of the coronavirus in the disease landscape could mean brutal and long-lasting seasonal surges of cold-weather illnesses for years to come, resulting in hospitals struggling to care for non-covid emergencies and unable to give patients timely, lifesaving treatments.</p> <p>Winter has traditionally been crunchtime for hospitals because of influenza and another seasonal pathogen, respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV. Now SARS-CoV-2 has joined them to form an unholy trinity of pathogens that surge in the cold months.</p> <p>White House covid-19 response coordinator Ashish Jha said the American health-care system may not be able to withstand the continued viral onslaught, straining the system's ability to care for other serious illnesses.</p> <p>"I am worried that we are going to have, for years, our health system being pretty dysfunctional, not being able to take care of heart attack patients, not being able to take care of cancer patients, not being able to take care of the kid who's got appendicitis because we're going to be so overwhelmed with respiratory viruses for ... three or four months a year," Jha told The Washington Post.</p> <p>He described a scenario in which the typical winter logjam of patients begins much earlier than usual — in August or September — because of the coronavirus. It's a darker scenario than the administration has portrayed in the past, and one Jha said most Americans have yet to realize.</p> <p>"I just think people have not appreciated the chronic cost, because we have seen this as an acute problem," Jha said. "We have no idea how hard this is going to make life for everybody, for long periods of time."</p> <p>James Jarvis, a senior executive at Bangor-based Northern Light Health, the second-largest health system in Maine, shares Jha's concerns. He said hospitals now expect to see patients who are sicker, including people with long covid, children more at risk for diabetes because of covid-19 infections and patients suffering from heart conditions related to previous bouts of the disease.</p> <p>Jarvis, who also works in a small family medicine practice, had a patient who was hospitalized two months ago for covid-19, and then again for influenza. He was discharged to an acute rehabilitation facility but then suffered a stroke. There was no bed available at Northern Light's flagship hospital, Eastern Maine Medical Center, so he was treated in the emergency room for four days.</p> <p>"He never left the emergency room," Jarvis said. "I felt horrible. I'd see him and say, 'I'm so sorry that you're still in the emergency room.'" The patient received the care that was needed and eventually returned home, but Jarvis was frustrated that the patient never got a hospital bed.</p> <p>These warnings come at a moment when public health officials are still waiting to see how bad the current winter surge in viral infections turns out to be. So far, this covid winter in the United States has been challenging, though not nearly as disastrous as the past two. But most of the winter still lies ahead, and covid-19 hospitalizations have risen significantly since October.</p> <p>Hospitalizations remained generally flat during the early part of January, with about 45,000 inpatients suffering from covid-19 as of Wednesday. The national numbers can mask geographical surges: States along the East Coast have been hit hardest so far, while the West has been largely spared.</p>

Public health officials are closely monitoring the spread of XBB.1.5, an omicron subvariant that is the most transmissible form of the coronavirus yet seen. It has already become the dominant lineage in the Northeast and will probably, at current rates, take over everywhere, outcompeting other omicron variants.

Despite its transmissibility, XBB.1.5 does not appear more likely than earlier forms of omicron to cause severe disease, and as it spreads in a population with significant levels of immunity, it has not managed to create the same devastating surge of hospitalizations seen in the past two years.

In January 2021, more than 3,000 people a day were dying of covid-19, because almost no one had immunity at that point and vaccines had just started rolling out. Last year, the situation was only marginally better. The U.S. population had much more immunity from vaccines and previous infections, but the omicron variant was leaps and bounds more transmissible than previous ones. Omicron was less likely to be fatal for an infected patient, but so many people got sick so quickly that the nationwide death toll in January 2022 spiked to more than 2,500 a day.

This winter, the “triple-demic” of the coronavirus, the flu and RSV has not been as terrible as feared. Pediatric hospitalizations for RSV rose sharply in the fall but have dropped recently. The flu started its cold-weather assault relatively early in the fall, rose quickly and has declined steadily for the past five weeks.

The big unknown now is what will happen as the health-care system feels the effects of holiday gatherings.

Jha told The Post that he compares the health-care system to a sea wall, holding back a certain level of water. In winter, when case numbers pile up, the water splashes over a little. Hospitals staff up temporarily and try to make it through until the water recedes. That’s the old normal.

But SARS-CoV-2 has dumped new water in that sea, and the flood of patients has cascading effects on other types of medical care.

Anne Zink, chief medical officer for the Alaska Department of Health, said Jha’s sea wall analogy accurately describes the stress of the pandemic on America’s overall declining health.

“The sea wall was crumbling before the pandemic, and the waves of the pandemic created great holes, and that continual onslaught will degrade the wall and make it worse,” said Zink, an emergency room physician who is also president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

In addition, uncertainties in the medical supply chain have become the new normal, said Jarvis of Northern Light Health. Medication and supply shortages happen with greater frequency. Critical shortages for nurses and other staff are expected to worsen as physicians and nurses retire but aren’t replaced in the same numbers. More than 7,000 nurses at two major New York hospital systems walked off the job Monday after labor talks broke down over staffing and workloads, though tentative deals were reached Thursday enabling them to return to work.

Before the pandemic, the hospital system had always had some flexibility and had been able to manage its shortage of acute-care beds, Jarvis said. “But that flexibility is now gone,” he said. “There is no wiggle room or expansion room that we would have for anything in reserve.”

Since the start of the pandemic, experts have warned that covid-19 is not the only killer when health-care systems are under stress. People with ailments may delay tests and screenings, they may be more reluctant to go to the hospital for fear of catching an infection, and patients may wind up waiting hours for an examination when minutes count.

“Delays of care will result in people having either more severe disease or, unfortunately, dying, and there’s little that we can do to prevent that,” Jarvis said. “You know, that has always happened, but never to the extent that it’s happening now.”

As for the future, “it’s only going to get worse,” Jarvis said.

Hospitals are already under financial stress because of rising labor costs, physician burnout and the trend toward outpatient treatment. The added coronavirus strain is likely to push some facilities over the edge, noted Robert Wachter, a professor and chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California at San Francisco.

“With all of this, you’ll see hospitals ... begin closing at a faster pace, leaving some rural/suburban communities without a hospital, and fewer hospitals in urban areas,” Wachter said by email.

So far, Congress and the federal government broadly have not taken concerted action to address these chronic challenges. There is no cavalry on the horizon for the health-care system.

Some officials in the Biden administration aren’t sure the scenario will be quite as grim as Jha outlined.

“It’s not an unreasonable hypothesis,” said one senior administration official involved with the coronavirus response, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity. “But I don’t think we have hit a steady state of disease to be able to say for sure what we will see year in and year out. ... It’s very dynamic.”

“We all agree that the virus is evolving faster than we thought. We just don’t know where the virus is headed. We don’t even know what the next three weeks are going to hold.”

As always, the unknown factor in predicting the coming months and years is evolution: Viruses mutate. There is no way to predict what the coronavirus will do next, but experts do not think it has run out of evolutionary space.

Still, for more than a year, all of the new circulating versions of the virus have been subvariants of omicron and have not shown signs of making people sicker.

“If XBB.1.5 had the virulence of delta, we would be in deep weeds,” said Ross McKinney, chief scientific officer for the Association of American Medical Colleges.

McKinney and other experts stress the importance of improving vaccine uptake to reduce the respiratory disease burden — to ward off severe covid-19 cases, as well as other diseases like the flu. Despite all the pain and suffering inflicted during the pandemic, vaccine acceptance remains dismayingly low, experts say.

“The willingness of the public to accept vaccines to limit the spread of these respiratory diseases is very limited,” said William Schaffner, an infectious-disease doctor at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. “If the public doesn’t accept them, there’ll be more people sick and greater stress on the health-care system.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 China’s combative diplomat sidelined
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/epz3pm/china-diplomat-zhao-lijian
GIST	<p>A more powerful China has brought with it a brand of assertive—some say bellicose—foreign policy called “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, and few diplomats are as visible as Zhao Lijian, a brash spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry and its most prolific Twitter user.</p> <p>Zhao has promoted unfounded theories that COVID originated in the U.S. to his 1.9 million followers on the platform, and tweeted a digital illustration showing an Australian soldier preparing to slit an Afghan boy’s throat, following a report on Australian special forces’ war crimes in Afghanistan. He won praise in China for using his megaphone—on Twitter as well as in his day job—to stick it to the West, including by</p>

lashing out at foreign reporters for asking “malicious questions.” Other Chinese diplomats took cue from his success, adopting a combative style that has changed how the world sees China.

But as the [chaotic explosion of COVID](#) has humbled the Chinese government, the leader of the wolf pack is in retreat.

Earlier this week, Zhao was delisted as a spokesperson in the Chinese foreign ministry’s website. He has been named instead as a deputy director of the ministry’s Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs, a relatively obscure department responsible for developing policies on maritime boundaries.

“It does not look like a promising next step for him in his career,” Bill Bishop, author of Sinocism, a newsletter that analyzes Chinese current affairs, told VICE World News. “I can’t find anybody in China who thinks this is not a demotion, given how careers progress inside the foreign ministry and the trajectory of previous foreign ministry spokesmen.”

Chinese officials in Zhao’s high-profile former role usually go up the hierarchy. This includes Qin Gang, who became Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. in 2021 and succeeded Wang Yi as foreign minister last week.

Some observers have perceived Zhao’s reassignment as a sign of a thaw in bilateral ties between the U.S. and China and a reversal of its aggressive diplomatic posturing. Qin, the foreign minister, recently wrote [in the Washington Post](#) expressing optimism about China-U.S. relations.

“I can see multiple good reasons to move him, laterally, into a non-front-facing role for this rotation in order to take the heat off,” said Andrew Small, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

But some have suggested Beijing might have moved Zhao out of the public eye for more personal reasons.

Zhao’s wife, a Chinese businesswoman in Pakistan, has repeatedly raised eyebrows for her posts on Chinese social media. In November, she lamented the long hours and low pay of foreign ministry spokespeople. When Zhao contracted COVID last month, after the country abruptly ended its “zero-COVID” policy and lifted most pandemic curbs, she complained about China’s shortage of medicine—a slap in the face for a country that has repeatedly touted its superior management of the pandemic compared to Western governments.

In November, Zhao’s critics mocked him for [struggling to answer](#) a question about the historic protests against lockdown measures that preceded the reversal of the country’s COVID policy. At the regular press briefing, he fell into an awkward, minute-long silence following the question from a reporter.

While Chinese nationalists have cheered on Zhao in the past, some social media users now accuse him of tarnishing China’s reputation. “He was the one smearing China’s image,” read a top comment on Weibo on a news report about Zhao’s reappointment.

Zhao and the Chinese foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Dan Mattingly, an assistant professor of political science at Yale University, said China may have sidelined its most outspoken wolf warrior diplomat as party leaders realized that Zhao’s messaging was not effective. In his recent study, Mattingly found that Chinese diplomats’ Twitter posts attacking the country’s critics could generate backlash among foreign audiences.

But despite Zhao’s removal, he has left a lasting imprint on the Chinese diplomatic corp, Mattingly said. “In some ways Zhao won the larger battle. The lite version of Wolf Warrior posturing is now common for most Chinese diplomats, who have to show the home office that they are patriots and party loyalists who will take a firm stand against the West,” Mattingly said.

Rhetoric aside, there’s so far little indication that China is changing its foreign policy, Bishop said.

	<p>“Maybe we’ll have less aggressive, hooligan-like comments from the foreign ministry,” said Bishop, who was blocked by Zhao on Twitter after he said China deserves a better spokesperson.</p> <p>“But there’s nothing in the sort of official discourse that would indicate any sort of a fundamental shift in their approach to foreign policy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Impact of Russian casualties
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20230112-makiivka-and-bakhmut-the-impact-of-russian-casualties
GIST	<p>On New Year’s Eve Russians could listen to a message from Vladimir Putin in which he praised them for fighting to protect ‘our people in our historical territories in the new regions of the Russian Federation’ and reminded them that, ‘Russia’s future is what matters the most. Defending our Motherland is the sacred duty we owe to our ancestors and descendants.’ If they needed more reminders that their armed forces were engaged in a war of conquest they could watch a Moscow New Year party on state TV where the toast was to the country’s enlargement and in which Ukrainians were mocked.</p> <p>Death at Makiivka</p> <p>And then just as 2023 began, a Vocational College in Makiivka, close to the city of Donetsk and some 12.5 km from the front line, was hit by Ukrainian artillery. The building housed hundreds of recently conscripted Russian soldiers, largely from the southwest district of Saratov. Vehicles and equipment were parked beside the building. The soldiers shared the building with ammunition, which was the main reason that so much was obliterated in the blast. Soon this was the talk of the Telegram channels favored by Russian military bloggers. The Ministry of Defense, rarely forthcoming on its losses in war, had no choice but to acknowledge the disaster. At first it confirmed 69 deaths. This number later crept up to 89. The unofficial number is closer to 300 killed.</p> <p>The response from the Russian high command was to blame the victims. According to Lieutenant General Sergei Sevryukov, ‘the main reason for the incident was the activation and mass use – contrary to a prohibition – of mobile phones by personnel in the enemy’s range.’ This enabled ‘the enemy to track and determine the coordinates of the soldiers’ locations for a missile strike.’</p> <p>This proposition, that this was the result solely of a lapse in operational security, is hard to take seriously. Such lapses do occur, although relatives deny that this was the case with their men. The main problem with this explanation is that the deployment of men and equipment at this site was hardly a secret.</p> <p>The troops arrived at Makiivka on 18 December. Their presence could easily have been picked up by drones or local agents. The unit’s deputy commander – who was killed in the strike – was reportedly aware of the risk and urgently looking for a new location for his men. As a Ukrainian military spokesman, Serhii Cherevatyi, observed:</p> <p>Of course, using phones with geolocation is a mistake. But it is clear that this version looks a bit ridiculous. It is clear that this was not the main reason. The main reason was that they were unable to covertly deploy these personnel. And we took advantage of that, having detected the target powerfully and destroyed it.</p> <p>Furthermore, the effects of the strike were magnified because of the stored. ammunition. This turned what would otherwise have been a serious loss into a catastrophe. The UK’s Ministry of Defense cited this when highlighting how ‘unprofessional practices contribute to Russia’s high casualty rate’. This point was echoed by Russian military bloggers, including Igor Girkin (‘Our generals are untrainable in principle’.) At any rate, the official explanation was found to be sufficiently unconvincing for the Kremlin to promise a full inquiry and the punishment of ‘guilty’ officials. Some pro-war lawmakers demanded an investigation. One, Sergei Mironov, called for the prosecution of all officials responsible, ‘whether they wear epaulets or not.’</p>

Another reason to doubt the official version of events is that this was not an isolated incident. On 11 December Ukraine claimed to have struck a [church in Melitopol](#) being used as a base by Russian soldiers. They have also claimed that up to 500 Russian troops were either killed or wounded in another hit on a troop and ammunition concentration [near Chulakivka](#), in the Kherson region, on New Year's Eve. The Russian authorities have said nothing on this, although at least one military blogger has referred to it. We do have confirmation of an attack on a hospital wing occupied by the Wagner Group at Pervomaisk, some 25 km east of Bakhmut, which left 70 dead, because the organization's head Yevgeny Prigozhin, visited the site and [viewed the body bags](#).

The problem illuminated by the Makiivka attack, therefore, is far more fundamental than command ineptitude or lax security. The problem for Russia is that all troop concentrations are vulnerable relatively close to the front. The accuracy of HIMARS along with other Ukrainian systems means that in principle any fixed target relatively close to the front can be attacked as soon as its coordinates are known. To prevent losses of ammunition dumps or whole military units they need to be dispersed and if possible kept to the rear. But this leads to major inefficiencies, aggravated by the winter weather, when it comes to bringing them together for combat purposes. There are not many places that can accommodate large numbers of troops with some provision for food, sleep, and hygiene, so it is not surprising that they end up in public buildings such as schools. Emphasizing these vulnerabilities has become an important part of Ukraine's current communications strategy, because of the dilemmas this sets for Russian commanders.

The Battle for Bakhmut

Ukraine also needs to target concentrations of Russian soldiers to reduce the benefits Russia has gained from the extra troops generated through mobilization. Although their training and kit is poor, they have been used to strengthen defensive positions along the extensive front line and hamper Ukraine's efforts to concentrate its own forces to mount attacks. While seeking to hold back Ukrainian advances, Russian forces have also persevered with their one serious offensive operation, which is to take Bakhmut in Donetsk. This has become one of a series of epic encounters, along with Mariupol and Severodonetsk, in which the Russians spend months and heavy casualties trying to take cities which they consider strategic, which are then reduced to rubble. When the battle for Bakhmut began five months ago, it was relevant to Putin's objective, to take all of the Donbas. Since the summer, however, Russian forces have been pushed back in the neighboring provinces of Kharkiv and Kherson and are now defending positions in Luhansk.

So far, and at a high cost, Ukraine has thwarted the Russian offensive. A vivid and candid piece of reporting on the battle by Ukrainian correspondent [Illia Ponomarenko](#) brings home the remorseless nature of the fight. The city is now at least 60 percent destroyed and some 90 percent of its population has fled.

This remains an artillery war, because Russia has found that only relentless pounding of Ukrainian positions can force retreats. Despite the regular bombardment, the Russians, with Wagner mercenaries to the fore, have struggled to make progress. The rate of fire has slowed down to about a third of previous levels – perhaps reflecting developing shortages of munitions or just Ukrainian successes in making the storage and movement of ammunition more hazardous.

Ponomarenko describes the Ukrainian infantry as being 'sick, tired, full of bitter resentment', and straining under its own losses, yet still regularly repelling Russian attacks. Ukraine has problems with supplies, especially for its Soviet-era systems, but it does not want to give Russia the satisfaction of any victory. This was underlined when President Zelensky visited the city on 20 December, at a time when it appeared in peril. The day after Ukrainian forces mounted a counterattack and forced Russian forces to withdraw from some areas they had taken. But this remains a back and forth battle. On Friday there were reports of a Russian move into the adjacent town of Soledar, adding to the pressure on the Ukrainian side.

The Ukrainians claim that the Russian losses have been huge. [US sources](#) are more cautious but still assess that out of a force of nearly 50,000 mercenaries, Wagner has lost over 4,100 killed and 10,000 wounded, including over 1,000 killed between late November and early December near Bakhmut. Because of this they have struggled to mount mass infantry attacks, often moving forward in quite small groups, who would be unable to exploit any breakthrough even if one was achieved.

And Russians roll on, and on, and on, and on. They never stop throwing their scum at us. Sometimes we can hear Wagner commanders talk on communications: “Run to the Ukrainian trenches, and whoever makes it — you know what to do.”

In another report a deputy commander of a Ukrainian battalion [observed](#):

We know how they are trying to attack. The losses are not even detachments, not combat formations of the Wagnerites, but simply the crowds with which they are trying to storm, such small groups of 8, 10 or 20 people each reach 80%.

He added that the wounded were often left to freeze and die from either the weather or their injuries.

Manpower and equipment shortages [have](#) undermined the assault without stopping it. Everything has just become more attritional. This was [Prigozhin](#)’s assessment:

In Artemovsk [the Russian name for Bakhmut], every house has become a fortress. Our guys sometimes fight for more than a day over one house. Sometimes they fight for weeks over one house. And behind this house, there is still a new line of defense, and not one. And how many such lines of defense are there in Artemovsk? Five hundred would probably not be an exaggeration.

Both Ukrainian and Russian forces face the problem that they have sufficient to mount occasional attacks and gain ground, but not quite enough to achieve a commanding position.

Prigozhin’s Propaganda Push

Prigozhin’s explanation for such limited gains after many months is a lack of equipment and shells, and his explanation for the lack is an unresponsive Ministry of Defense. In one video he speaks sympathetically to a soldier lamenting the shortages. This reinforced a message he endorsed when two of his fighters accused Russia’s Chief of General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov of denying them ammunition. With their faces covered by scarves they made their protest:

We are fighting the entire Ukrainian army, and where are you? There’s only one word to describe what you are—a faggot.

One can understand why elements in the regular army find Prigozhin and his Wagner group irritating, but I have seen no evidence that he has been denied supplies deliberately. Gerasimov has described Bakhmut as a priority. On 21 December, when Russian hopes that the city could fall imminently were high, [he said](#), ‘The situation on the front line has stabilized, with the main efforts of the Russian troops concentrated on completing the liberation of the territory of the Donetsk People’s Republic.’

So what is going on? The simplest explanation is that the Russian military does not have enough to go round and that Prigozhin is making an extremely unsubtle bid for a larger share of what is available. [The Economist](#) has noted, after shaky relations earlier in the war, Prigozhin had appeared to find a way to work with the regular army, especially after his candidate, General Sergei Surovikin, was put in charge of the overall operation. But the more Russian forces suffer shortages the more Prigozhin objects that he is not getting his fair allocation. From Surovikin’s perspective questions of priorities will be getting more difficult and he may wonder how much he can favor the Bakhmut front when he has units elsewhere that need support.

As always also when we look at battlefield developments we also have to keep an eye on Moscow politics. Leaving aside claims that his main interest is in getting control of the salt and gypsum mines near Bakhmut, which would not be wholly out of character, Prigozhin’s most vital interest in the battle for now is that his reputation and claims for influence in the higher direction of the war depends on the city’s capture. So in addition to wanting to ensure that he gets resources, he wants to be sure of being able to share the blame if this battle does not go Wagner’s way.

Prigozhin has been on something of a public relations offensive in recent days. His most recent video shows him granting freedom to a group of former convicts who had survived six months at the front, albeit in some cases without all their limbs. [His advice](#) for effective integration back into Russian society:

‘Don’t drink too much, don’t use drugs, and don’t rape any broads.’ One can only speculate about the impact of a load of war-hardened and weapons-trained convicts being released back into Russian society.

Although Prigozhin has avoided any criticism of the President, others have noted his high visibility, and readiness to go to the front lines, compared with Putin’s isolation and staged public appearances. Thus in November, when he wanted to calm public anger with the botched nature of the mobilization, Putin met with a [hand-picked collection of mothers](#) who could be guaranteed not to raise any awkward questions while ignoring representatives of more activist groups such as the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia. After telling the women he appreciated the void left by the loss of a loved one, he added: But you know what comes to my mind: in our country, about 30,000 people die in road accidents, nearly the same number die from alcohol. Unfortunately, it happens. This is how life works. Life is complex and multifaceted, more complicated than can be written somewhere on paper.

We are all under the Lord, under Allah, under Christ, I don’t know, everyone who believes in higher powers, it doesn’t matter what religion a person adheres to: we are all mortal, we are all under the Lord. And someday we will all leave this world. It is inevitable. The question is how we lived.

Sacrifice and Futility

These themes of sacrifice and martyrdom have become part of the death cult surrounding the war. What the young and no-so-young men who are being sent to the front feel about old men talking about the inevitability of death and the nobility of dying for one’s country is hard to know. Attitudes to the war within Russia and among the troops are complex. The grumbles appear to be about the competence with which the war is being waged more than the purposes for which it was launched, which have expanded during its course from a limited military operation to an existential struggle for survival with the West. Those below Putin are regularly attacked by critics but the President himself seems off bounds. Many of the most likely dissidents are either imprisoned or have fled. For now the mood appears to be one of stoical acceptance of the situation rather than resistance.

The [New York Times](#) had an interview with a drafted soldier called Aleksandr, who was ‘enraged at the way he and his comrades were dropped into Ukraine with few bullets for their aging rifles and forced to live in a cowshed with only a few meal packets to share.’ His commanders told them they were going to for training when they were being sent to the front lines, where most were killed or grievously wounded. He was in hospital after suffering concussion. Yet when discharged he expected to return to Ukraine. ‘This is how we are raised,’ Aleksandr said. ‘We grew up in our country understanding that it doesn’t matter how our country treats us. Maybe this is bad. Maybe this is good. Maybe there are things we do not like about our government.’ But, ‘when a situation like this arises, we get up and go.’

The biggest risk for Putin therefore remains less dissatisfaction with the death toll but that the military effort put into this war continues to yield little, so that the sacrifices become sullied by a sense of futility rather than being uplifted by a great patriotic cause. The loss of so many men may not bother the Russian high command if they accept them as an unavoidable part of war, though they may be embarrassed by acts of gross carelessness as with Makiivka. But they will be bothered if there are insufficient to cover basic military tasks. It was because Russian forces were getting close to this position that Putin agreed to mass mobilization in September.

Regular losses of troops makes military failure more likely, which is why it is not surprising to [see reports](#), emanating from Ukraine, that Russia is ready to mobilize another 500,000 conscripts in addition to the 300,000 already called up. For the moment this may be premature, in that only half of the 300,000 have yet to be sent to the front while the others are being prepared for offensive operations later in the year and presumably could be rushed in to shore up flagging defenses. The Ukrainian view is that the Russians need success and only expect to be able to achieve it through overwhelming numbers. Whether or not any new offensives are likely to prosper it is evident that the mood in the Kremlin would be even more gloomy if nothing could be planned and the prospect was only of a grinding, defensive war, being forced into progressive retreats.

Meanwhile Ukraine is looking forward to getting more capabilities to support its offensives. In [recent days](#), France has agreed to send its AMX-10 RC armored reconnaissance vehicles to Ukraine, and the US and Germany have both agreed to send Infantry Fighting Vehicles (the Bradley and Marder), which are a step down from main battle tanks but a step up from armored personnel carriers. The Bradley is part of a massive new \$28.5 billion commitment of weapons to Ukraine, including Patriot air defense systems. Taken together all the recent announcements of new support to Ukraine speak to a readiness to support a major offensive in a few months time, after delivery and training.

Ukraine's military intelligence chief, Kyrylo Budanov, [said](#) in a recent interview that Kyiv is planning a 'major push' in the spring. Another [Ukrainian military spokesman](#) has predicted that:

If the Ukrainian defense forces break through the defensive lines of the Russian occupation forces on the Svatove-Kreminna line and, accordingly, the transfer of hostilities closer to the city of Luhansk, a significant part of the military units of the 2nd Army Corps, especially from among those mobilized in the temporarily occupied territories, plans to surrender.

Ukrainian forces have been improving their positions on the Svatove-Kreminna line but it remains to be seen if they can make a major breakthrough which leads to a further retreat and even a rout of Russian forces. As I have noted before just because there has been little change in the front lines one should not assume that the two sides are locked in a perpetual stalemate, just as one should not assume that rapid advances can continue without a need to stop and consolidate in the face of new resistance.

Ukraine has the advantage, which should grow, in its ability to hit vital targets with accuracy and to maneuver, which it wishes to use to avoid grueling attritional battles such as Bakhmut. Those are the only sort of battles Russia seems able to fight. It is stuck with a form of warfare that depends on artillery barrages and indifference to casualties which limits its options and requires continuing supplies of shells and men.

When we step back from the daily news the underlying trends of this war favor Ukraine. It is learning to cope with the repeated Russian attacks on its critical infrastructure, and once spring comes the impact will decline, while it has been getting bolder in its attacks on facilities on Russian territory. The energy shock has not turned the West away from supporting Ukraine and instead they are offering support for future land offensives. Here lies the biggest danger for Putin - more retreats rather than more casualties - and a developing aura of futility. The question of what it takes to get Russia to abandon its war of conquest remains unanswered but that does not mean that no answer will ever be found.

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HEADLINE	01/12 ICE: significant enforcement resources
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/ice-reports-increases-in-arrests-and-detentions-along-with-known-or-suspected-terrorist-explusions/
GIST	<p>U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said “significant” enforcement resources went toward removing individuals under Title 42 as the agency reported in its annual report increases in its detained docket, Alternatives to Detention participants, and expelled terrorists in the last fiscal year.</p> <p>ICE has more than 20,000 law enforcement and support personnel in more than 400 offices across the world, and operates with an annual budget of about \$8 billion. The agency consists of three operational branches — Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA) — in addition to management and administration.</p> <p>ERO conducts administrative arrests of noncitizens for violations of U.S. immigration law in the interior of the United States. For FY 2022, ERO reported nearly twice the number of administrative arrests it made in FY 2021: 142,750 administrative arrests, with 96,354 of those categorized as “Other Immigration Violators” as a result of increased Border Patrol encounters and ERO’s assistance to CBP — the majority of those who were taken into ERO custody over the fiscal year were originally arrested by CBP, the report notes, resulting in “significant workload increases for ERO.”</p>

ERO arrested 46,396 noncitizens with criminal histories last fiscal year, a group that collectively had 198,498 charges and convictions — an average of 4.3 charges or convictions per individual — including 21,531 charges or convictions for assault, 18,009 for traffic offenses not including DUI, 8,164 for sex offenses and sexual assault, 5,554 for weapons offenses, 1,501 for homicide-related offenses, and 1,114 for kidnapping.

ERO's authorities to execute warrants and initiate prosecution for crimes beyond immigration offenses in FY 2022 resulted in 2,208 criminal arrests, 2,182 criminal indictments, and 2,199 criminal convictions for a range of offenses including fraud, assault, and weapons possession.

In FY 2022, ERO issued 78,829 detainers — a request to state or local law enforcement agencies to notify ICE before a noncitizen subject to removal from the country is released from police custody — for noncitizens with criminal histories, including 1,751 homicide-related offenses, 1,911 kidnappings, 2,934 robberies, 26,186 assaults, and 8,450 sex crimes.

More than 4.7 million noncitizens are on ICE's non-detained docket — that was 3.6 million in FY 2021 — while the agency cared for an average of 22,630 people in ICE custody over the fiscal year. The majority of detained individuals were citizens of Nicaragua, followed by Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Turkey.

"Most noncitizens subject to removal are monitored outside the detention setting through a variety of mechanisms," the report notes. "In FY 2022, the number of cases on the non-detained national docket continued on an upward trend, increasing 29% between the end of FY 2021 and the end of FY 2022, to 4,759,560 cases."

"The steady growth of the non-detained docket is being driven by increased CBP apprehensions of noncitizens at the Southwest Border and the transfer of cases for subsequent processing by ERO," the agency added.

ERO significantly expanded its Alternatives to Detention case management from an average daily population of 23,000 active participants at the end of FY 2014 to 321,000 at the end of FY 2022.

"However, this represents only a fraction of the cases assigned to the non-detained national docket," the report added. "With approximately 6,000 ERO officers spread across 25 field offices, ERO lacks sufficient resources to more closely monitor and provide robust case management services to this entire population. Participants currently spend an average of 18 to 19 months enrolled in ATD before they are removed from the program to prioritize more recent arrivals and those deemed eligible for release from ICE custody, who represent a greater flight risk than those who have been enrolled and compliant with ATD for longer timelines."

In FY 2022, ERO conducted 72,177 removals to more than 150 countries worldwide, with 36,313 of those carried out via charter flight, including 256 charter flights to Guatemala, 220 to Honduras, 125 to Haiti, and 120 to El Salvador. ICE said it removed from the country last fiscal year 2,667 known or suspected gang members, 55 known or suspected terrorists, seven human rights violators, and 74 foreign fugitives wanted by their home governments for crimes including homicide, rape, terrorism, and kidnapping. In FY 2021, 34 individuals known or suspected to be terrorists were removed from the country by ICE ERO.

Under the Title 42 public health order, ICE Air Operations assisted CBP in expelling 65,076 single adults in FY 2022, while ICE's Juvenile and Family Management Division expelled an additional 52,137 members of family units. "While ERO continued to conduct removals of noncitizens with final removal orders during FY 2022, a significant portion of ERO's removal workload was dedicated to assisting with expulsions of noncitizens pursuant to the Title 42 authority," the report says.

Homeland Security Investigations reported 36,685 criminal arrests in FY 2022, the seizure of more than 1.8 million pounds of narcotics, identifying or assisting 1,170 victims of child exploitation, and assisting 765 victims of human trafficking.

	<p>“Additionally, HSI set a new record for seized currency and assets of more than \$5 billion, dealing a significant blow to TCO operations and criminals seeking to profit from illicit crimes,” the report stated. “This increase of approximately \$4 billion from the previous year was due largely to increased seizures of cryptocurrency utilized for criminal activity.”</p> <p>HSI recommended that 11,863 visas be refused during the fiscal year because of terrorist connections or other derogatory information.</p> <p>The directorate also reported a marked increase in the amount of fentanyl seized — 20,980 pounds in FY 2022 compared to 14,530 pounds the previous year — and increases in the number of child exploitation and transnational gang cases initiated.</p> <p>“In FY 2023, we anticipate that the challenging operational conditions that have characterized the past several years will continue to impact ICE activities and resource requirements,” Acting Director Tae Johnson wrote in the report. “To successfully carry out our public safety and national security mission within the interior of the country and continue to support the DHS enterprise at the Southwest Border, ICE will carefully balance resources while finding new and innovative ways to increase organizational efficiency and improve core processes.”</p> <p>In addition to its core missions of “investigating, disrupting, and dismantling terrorist, domestic, transnational, and other criminal threats,” combating illicit drugs and financial crimes, helping identify and assist victims of human trafficking, and fighting wildlife traffickers, Johnson said the agency “will play a key role in strengthening the United States’ cybersecurity posture through its regional, national, and international partnerships, as well as developing and training a cyber-enabled workforce.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Nursing shortage keeps getting worse
SOURCE	https://time.com/6246514/nurse-strike-new-york-city-covid-19/
GIST	<p>Nurses in both the U.S. and U.K. flexed their bargaining muscle over the last few weeks amid increasing pressure on the countries’ respective health care system due to COVID-19. About 7,000 nurses from two New York City hospitals, Mount Sinai Hospital and Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, returned to work on January 12 after going on strike for three days. That followed tens of thousands of National Health Services nurses who went on strike in the U.K. for two days in December—those NHS workers are expected to take to the picket lines again next week. Despite the geographic distance, these nurses are proximate in their demands: that their facilities address serious shortages of health care workers, including by providing higher wages.</p> <p>The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) credited tentative deals on staffing ratios at both hospitals with leading to the end of the strike. The deal also included a 19% pay increase over three years. At Mount Sinai, the bargainers agreed to staffing ratios for all inpatient units with “firm enforcement,” the union said in a statement. The deal reached with Montefiore, entails “new safe staffing ratios in the Emergency Department, with new staffing language and financial penalties for failing to comply with safe staffing levels in all units,” according to the NYSNA.</p> <p>“Today, we can return to work with our heads held high, knowing that our victory means safer care for our patients and more sustainable jobs for our profession,” the union said.</p> <p>The striking nurses say that staffing shortages started years ago, but the problem has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of working U.S. nurses dropped by over 100,000, the largest single-year decline recorded in four decades of data, according to an analysis of the Current Population Survey published in <i>Health Affairs</i> in January, 2022. The crisis has continued into 2023; as of publishing, 15% of U.S. hospitals reported shortages in critical-care staffing, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.</p>

Matt Allen, a labor and delivery nurse and an elected leader for the NYSNA, said prior to the agreement that he and his colleagues at Mount Sinai Hospital in Harlem went on strike this past week in an effort to push the hospital to address understaffing, which he says threatens the quality of patient care.

“If COVID didn’t happen, I don’t know if we would be at this point right now,” said Allen. “One, it was just a traumatic experience for lots of us nurses to go through. But then, two, it’s further depleted our staffing by people retiring early, people burning out and leaving the profession or leaving bedside nursing.”

That toll continues to accrue, as the U.S. currently copes with a surge in COVID-19 cases thanks in large part to the new [XBB.1.15 variant](#) that is spreading rapidly across the country. As of Jan. 8, over 44,000 people in the U.S. were hospitalized with COVID-19—the most since August last year.

In New York alone, some 32,000 people were hospitalized with the virus in December, which as the chart below shows is the largest number of hospitalizations in over a year. Meanwhile, there are over 1,100 nursing vacancies between the two hospitals, according to the NYSNA.

The [American College of Nursing says that](#) shortages of nursing faculty and inadequate expansion of nursing schools in the U.S. have narrowed the pipeline for educating new professionals. Since the start of the pandemic, nurses have also been forced to fight to enshrine adequate staffing in union contracts. In addition to the effort in New York, an adequate nurse-to-patient ratio was a cornerstone of union bargaining that nearly led to strikes in [Minnesota](#) last month, and in California in [November](#).

In Allen’s view, the central problem in New York state isn’t a lack of trained nurses, but rather that they aren’t being incentivized to remain in the profession. In New York, there are about 170,000 registered nurses who are not practicing bedside nursing, according to the New York State Nurses Association.

The problem appears to be national, and perhaps getting worse: A survey by the American Nurses Foundation [conducted](#) in January 2022 found that 52% of nurses polled nationwide said they were considering leaving the profession, up from 40% from a survey conducted in 2021.

Prior to the pandemic, the [aging nursing workforce](#) was already a concern—and it seems that the pandemic has disproportionately pushed younger nurses away from the profession, at a time they are desperately needed. The January 2022 American Nurses Foundation survey found that younger nurses were particularly likely to be unhappy in their careers, with 31% of those aged 25 to 34 reporting that they intended to leave their position within the next six months, compared to 18% among those 55 or older. A big reason why is that young nurses were especially likely to report being in [poor mental health](#), with 66% of those under 35 reporting feeling anxious, compared to 35% of those 55 or older. Younger age is also generally a risk factor for [nurse burnout](#), according to an August 2021 [meta analysis](#) published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. This may be because less-experienced nurses are not used to handling extreme situations like a pandemic, including facing tough situations like watching patients suffer and die when nurses can’t provide standard health care.

According to Allen, the impact of understaffing during the pandemic for both patients and nurses has made him and his colleagues “angry” and “empowered to be taking a stand.” [For nurses like him](#), he says, it’s been painful to work 12 or 24-hour physically demanding shifts, and then to leave feeling “horrible that you didn’t do enough for your patient.”

“There needs to be recognition of the toll this has taken on us,” he says.

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HEADLINE	01/12 China warns Japan, US to stand down
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2023-01-12/china-signals-military-response-as-u-s-japan-accelerate-defense-plans

China on Thursday signaled plans to retaliate militarily to new security initiatives between Japan and the U.S., warning that the allies' accelerated cooperation will create new threats for themselves in the region.

Citing a Chinese military analyst, the English-language Global Times newspaper warned that if Japan continued dramatic increases in military spending and new security postures coordinated with the U.S. – particularly with regard to Taiwan – then the Chinese military “is sure to take countermeasures, including holding more exercises and patrols in international waters and airspace around Japan.”

It cited another analyst who said the new partnership “actually puts Japan in a riskier and more sacrificial position” in the region.

Though not a direct mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, the paper is aligned with its views. U.S. officials and analysts believe it often publishes what officials in Beijing choose not to say publicly.

The new threats, piling on to more subtle public warnings from Chinese military officials, come as the U.S. and Japan this week begin unveiling results of a new initiative to better prepare to confront Beijing militarily – especially in light of China's stated ambition to seize control of the independent nation of Taiwan, which it considers a breakaway province.

Japan's top diplomatic and military officials beginning Wednesday met in Washington, D.C., with their American counterparts ahead of a high-profile visit by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to the White House on Friday. Known as a “2+2” summit, the group in a press conference at the State Department late in the day praised Japan's decision to begin breaking from its historically pacifist stance – codified in its constitution since after World War II – and invest in its military to look more like those of other highly developed nations as well as prepare it to take on the increasingly bellicose challenges presented by regional powers, namely China and North Korea.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin as an example announced that the U.S. would reconfigure the 12th Marine Regiment currently based in Okinawa to make it “more lethal, more agile, more capable” in the coming years. The news represented the latest example of ongoing plans the U.S. has reportedly considered in recent weeks to deter but not provoke China, which the administration refers to as America's main “pacing challenge” in the region.

The news follows massive changes in Japan's defense footing under its new administration, including a radical new security strategy that invests 2% of its gross domestic product in the military over the next five years with a particular focus on developing weapons and tactics appropriate for a conflict with China.

Wang Wenbin, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, using carefully crafted language warned in a press conference early Thursday that any new forms of cooperation between the two powers should not harm the interests of any other countries in the Indo-Pacific or the region's current peace and stability.

Analysts similarly expect that the new initiative orchestrated by Washington and Tokyo will, predictably, enrage Beijing and elicit a dramatic response.

“Any increase in Japan's military strength will thus be met with concerns from its neighbors by fundamentally changing the security status quo in the region, with China and North Korea being the most upset,” private intelligence firm RANE concluded in a new analysis note, published after Wednesday's announcements.

However it added that initial Chinese retaliation would likely begin economically with attempts to isolate China's massive markets from Japanese products.

It notes, though, that Japan is currently the only country in the world that has formally given up the right to declare war and that a change in that footing will both address and contribute to a changing security dynamic in the region.

	<p>“By increasing its defense budget and military capabilities, Japan is not necessarily preparing for an imminent war, but rather ensuring it can be more proactive in enforcing its maritime territory against North Korean (and Chinese) threats without needing the United States' sign-off on every action, like every other ‘normal’ sovereign nation,” it writes. “Up until recently, China and North Korea were not threats to Japanese sovereignty, as China was not developed enough, and North Korea was primarily concerned with the potential for a peninsular conflict.</p> <p>“Current Japanese leadership is able to use the increasing threats from North Korea and the potential for Tokyo to be pulled into a Taiwanese conflict to justify the increase in defense spending,” according to RANE, “whereas those threats did not exist before.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Putin scolds minister in televised meeting
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/13/vladimir-putin-scolds-defence-industry-minister-manturov-tv-fooling-around
GIST	<p>Vladimir Putin has publicly scolded a senior minister and ally during a meeting broadcast on state television as sanctions from the stalling war in Ukraine caused fresh economic headaches for the Russian president.</p> <p>Speaking during a live video call with officials on Wednesday, the Russian leader appeared agitated and berated deputy prime minister Denis Manturov, who is also his trade and industry minister and responsible for overseeing Russia’s weapons and defence industry and supplies of equipment for troops. Putin criticised him for working too slowly on the country’s aircraft contracts, according to a transcript of the call later published by the Kremlin.</p> <p>Manturov, who has accompanied the president on several trips and is thought to have his favour, attempted to justify the delays, explaining that his ministry was set to build helicopter engines in St Petersburg that were previously manufactured in Ukraine when Putin rolled his eyes and replied: “Too long, [it is taking] too long ... I ask you to expedite this work.”</p> <p>At the beginning of the call, Manturov, who became subject to UK sanctions last month, is heard promising Putin that he will provide 175bn roubles (£2.12bn) to state airline Aeroflot to lease civilian and military aircraft for 2023 though to 2025.</p> <p>However Putin interrupts to claim none of the contracts are ready. “I know that there are no contracts at the enterprises, the directors told me,” he says. “What are you, really, playing the fool? When will the contracts be signed?”</p> <p>“These 700 aircraft, including helicopters, need to be worked out together with the Ministry of Defence, so that it is clear: how many the military department will order, and how many civilian ships will be ordered. Some enterprises still do not have an order, even for 2023.</p> <p>“Everyone understands the urgency of these issues,” Putin says, adding that “everything must be done within a month.</p> <p>“No, don’t try to do your best. Do it within a month. Don’t you understand the situation we’re in? It needs to be done in a month, no later.”</p> <p>Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov was later quoted by state media agency Tass as saying that Putin had “no serious complaints about Manturov’s work”.</p> <p>“This is a normal workflow,” he added.</p>

	<p>The televised incident is likely part of an ongoing Kremlin information campaign to elevate Putin's image as an involved wartime leader, US thinktank the Institute for the Study of War suggested in its latest update on Thursday.</p> <p>"Putin likely seeks scapegoats for the Russian defence industrial base's struggle to address equipment and technological shortages," the report read.</p> <p>"The Kremlin could have cut out the disagreement from its official transcript ... but chose to publicise Putin's harsh response, possibly to identify other officials within the Kremlin as the culprits for Russian defence industrial base's challenges and possibly to threaten other officials."</p> <p>The meeting came on the same day that Putin replaced his top commander in Ukraine after just three months in charge, in a move that is likely to have had political dimensions. The change in leadership comes amid ongoing tensions between senior figures in charge of Russia's war in Ukraine.</p> <p>Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff, was appointed on Wednesday as overall commander for the war, in the latest of several major shake-ups of Moscow's military leadership.</p> <p>In a statement, the defence ministry said that Gerasimov's appointment constituted a "raising of the status of the leadership" of the military force in Ukraine and was implemented to "improve the quality ... and effectiveness of the management of Russian forces".</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Day 324 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/13/russia-ukraine-war-at-a-glance-what-we-know-on-day-324-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, said on Thursday that Ukrainian forces defending Bakhmut and Soledar in the east would be armed with everything they need to keep Russian troops at bay in some of the bloodiest fighting of the war. Kyiv said earlier its troops were fighting to retain control of the now-battered industrial towns in the east, which Russian mercenaries claimed earlier this week to have taken. • Hundreds of civilians remain trapped in Soledar, Ukraine has said, as bloody fighting continues over control of the largely destroyed salt mining town. Pavlo Kyrilenko, the governor of Donetsk, told Ukrainian state TV that 559 civilians remained in Soledar, including 15 children, and could not be evacuated. • Ukraine's military has denied that Russian forces have encircled and captured Soledar. Ukrainian forces are "holding on" as "fierce fighting" continues in the town, Ukraine's deputy defence minister, Hanna Maliar, said on Thursday. Ukraine's military claimed its forces killed more than 100 Russian soldiers in a single strike in Soledar, while Volodymyr Zelenskyy earlier mocked Russia's claims it had captured the town and said fighting was ongoing. • Satellite images taken by Maxar Technologies show the destruction inflicted upon Soledar. The Guardian has a series of striking images from inside the eastern Ukrainian town. • President Vladimir Putin's move to replace his top commander in Ukraine after a few months is a sign of military disarray and his growing impatience in a war Russia is not winning, analysts said. The defence ministry in Moscow said Wednesday it had, again, replaced its top commander in Ukraine, putting army chief of staff Valery Gerasimov in charge. It is the latest of several major shake-ups of Moscow's military leadership. • More than a dozen senior EU officials will meet members of the Ukrainian government in Kyiv on 2 February, a day before the EU-Ukraine summit, a European Commission spokeswoman said Thursday. • A spokesperson for Ukraine's air force command has warned of the possibility of missile attacks from Belarus. In a televised statement today, Yuriy Ihnat said it was from Belarusian territory that most of the ballistic missiles were launched at the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. During a visit to Lviv on Wednesday, Zelenskyy called for his forces to be "ready both at

	<p>the border and in the regions” near Belarus amid fears Russia may launch a fresh assault from the north.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The head of Russia’s Wagner mercenary group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has claimed his forces have found the body of one of two British voluntary aid workers reported missing in eastern Ukraine. In a statement published on his Telegram channel late on Wednesday, Prigozhin did not mention the name of the dead man but said documents belonging to both Britons had been found on his body. • A former Russian deputy minister of defence has suggested the country could increase the upper age limit for conscription from 27 to 30 for this year’s spring draft campaign. Andrey Kartapolov, the head of the State Duma defence committee, suggested the change could take place without altering the lower bar for conscription of 18 years. • The commander of Russia’s ground forces, Oleg Salyukov, visited Belarus on Thursday to inspect the combat readiness of a joint force stationed there, the Belarusian defence ministry said. Salyukov was yesterday named as one of the deputy commanders of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine in the latest of a series of reshuffles. His visit came as Russia and Belarus have expanded their joint military training exercises in Belarus. • A US navy veteran has been released after almost a year in Russian detention, according to his family. Taylor Dudley, 35, of Michigan, was taken into custody by Russian border police last April after crossing the border from Poland into Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania. • A Ukrainian soldier has had successful surgery to remove an unexploded grenade from his chest, senior officials in Kyiv have said. Surgeons removed the weapon from just beneath the heart of the injured serviceman, while two sappers ensured the operation was conducted safely, said Hanna Maliar, Ukraine’s deputy minister of defence. • The British government is planning to provide tanks to Ukraine to help the country defend itself, according to a spokesperson for No 10. Speaking to reporters on Wednesday the spokesperson said Rishi Sunak had asked his defence secretary, Ben Wallace, to “work with partners” and to provide further support to Ukraine “including the provision of tanks”. • Germany should not stand in the way of other countries’ military support for Ukraine, the vice-chancellor, Robert Habeck, has said. It comes after Poland’s president, Andrzej Duda, announced plans to send 10 German-made Leopard tanks to Ukraine as part of an international coalition. The transfer would require permission from Germany. • Turkey has summoned Sweden’s ambassador over a protest in Stockholm in which a puppet of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was hung from its feet. Footage shared by pro-government Turkish media showed what they said were supporters of the Kurdish militant group PKK hanging an effigy of the Turkish leader at a demonstration outside the Stockholm city hall. Sweden has been seeking Turkey’s approval of its Nato membership bid, which it applied for after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year. Ankara has said Stockholm needs to clamp down on Kurdish groups it views as “terrorists”.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Ukraine: civilians trapped in Soledar
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/12/hundreds-of-civilians-are-trapped-in-soledar-amid-fierce-fighting-ukraine-says
GIST	<p>Hundreds of civilians remain trapped in Soledar, Ukraine has said, as bloody fighting continues over control of the largely destroyed salt mining town in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Pavlo Kyrylenko, the governor of Donetsk, told Ukrainian state TV that 559 civilians remained in Soledar, including 15 children, and could not be evacuated.</p> <p>Ukraine said on Thursday its troops were “holding on” as fighting continued in Soledar, dismissing claims made by the Russian mercenary group Wagner that its forces had taken control of the town.</p> <p>“Fighting is fierce in the Soledar direction. [The Russians] are moving over their own corpses,” Ukraine’s deputy defence minister, Hanna Maliar, said.</p>

“Russia is driving its own people to the slaughter by the thousands, but we are holding on.”

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner mercenary group, said on Wednesday his troops had captured Soledar after intense fighting, and that the town was “littered with Ukrainian servicemen”.

But the Kremlin has so far declined to declare victory in Soledar.

When asked about Prigozhin’s victory claims, Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, told journalists: “Let’s not rush, let’s wait for official statements. There is a positive dynamic in progress.”

The capture of Soledar would signify Moscow’s first significant gain in half a year.

In its daily military briefing on Thursday, the Russian defence ministry did not mention developments surrounding Soledar.

Russian forces have recently focused their efforts on the capture of Soledar as part of their ambition to take the nearby strategic city of Bakhmut and Ukraine’s larger eastern Donbas region, leading to fierce battles in sub-zero temperatures over the past five days.

Drone footage released by Ukraine this week revealed some of the destruction inflicted on Soledar after months of fighting, with bomb craters scarring the landscape.

Elsewhere, Ukrainian Brig Gen Oleksii Hromov said Russia was preparing a new offensive aimed at capturing Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions.

“It is expected that in the near future, the enemy will try to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk oblast, and may intensify its actions to capture the left-bank part of Zaporizhzhia oblast,” Hromov said.

Ukraine has been warning for weeks that Russia is preparing for a major offensive, claiming that Moscow is set to order the mobilisation of up to 500,000 conscripts in January.

Also on Thursday, a Russian delegation led by the commander of Russia’s ground forces, Oleg Salyukov, visited Belarus to review the combat readiness of a joint force stationed there.

Russia and Belarus have recently expanded their joint military training exercises in Belarus, as concern grows that Moscow is pressuring its closest ally to join the war.

Serhiy Naye, the commander of Ukraine’s joint forces, said on Thursday the “situation in Belarus ... did not pose an immediate threat”.

The trip came a day after a major shake-up in Moscow’s military leadership in which Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff, was appointed as the country’s overall commander for the war in Ukraine.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Protest: NCAA transgender inclusion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/jan/12/demonstrators-protest-ncaa-transgender-athlete-inclusion
GIST	<p>Former Kentucky swimmer Riley Gaines and about two dozen demonstrators outside the NCAA convention Thursday protested the inclusion of transgender athletes in women’s sports and threatened the association with legal action if it doesn’t change its policies.</p> <p>Gaines competed in last year’s NCAA swimming and diving championships against Penn’s Lia Thomas, who became first transgender woman to win a national title (the women’s 500-yard freestyle). She also placed fifth in the 200 freestyle, tying with Gaines.</p>

“Today, we intend to personally tell the NCAA to stop discriminating against female athletes by handing them a petition that we have garnered nearly 10,000 signatures on in just a couple of days,” Gaines said, kicking off more than an hour of speeches that attracted a few onlookers and a handful of quiet counter-protesters.

The topic has divided the US for the past several years, with critics saying transgender athletes have an advantage over cisgender women in competition. Eighteen states have passed laws banning transgender athletes from participating in female school sports; a federal judge earlier this month ruled West Virginia’s ban is constitutional and can remain in place.

The NCAA has permitted transgender athletes to compete since 2010.

The [Transgender](#) Student-Athlete Participation Policy was updated a year ago, taking a sport-by-sport approach that brings the NCAA in line with the US and international Olympic committees.

Full implementation of the policy was scheduled to be phased in by August but the NCAA Board of Governors this week approved a recommendation to delay that through the 2023-24 academic year “to address operational considerations”.

NCAA leadership says the stated goal in policy making is “not if transgender athletes are included, but how”.

“We want to have an environment that is fair, welcoming and inclusive for all of (the athletes),” Ivy League executive director Robin Harris said at the convention during a session this week on the topic. Harris said the transgender athletes policy is no different from other eligibility requirements.

“They are playing by the rules,” NCAA director of inclusion Jean Merrill said during the session.

Schuyler Bailar, a transgender man who switched from the women’s swim team to the men’s during his time at Harvard, said he believes the NCAA is doing the best it can to be inclusive, fair and effective with its policies. The challenge is that the standards are not static.

“It’s just not that simple. I think they’re ever moving, ever evolving. And fairness is ever evolving, as well, the more we learn about bodies and biology and people and the more we understand diversity and equity and inclusion,” Bailar said at the convention session.

At the protest, Alliance Defending Freedom attorney Christiana Kiefer said the NCAA is violating Title IX, the landmark gender equity legislation enacted in 1972, and legal action against the NCAA could take several forms.

“So I think that could look like a federal lawsuit against the NCAA,” she said. “I think that could look like a Title IX complaint. And I think it could look like even universities starting to actually push back against the NCAA and saying, ‘Hey, we have a legal obligation to protect fair athletic opportunities for female athletes and if we fail to do that, you’re kind of binding our hands and not allowing us to fulfill our legal obligations to the female athletes at our schools.’”

The NCAA has not yet taken a stand against states that have banned transgender athletes from competing in women’s sports. The NCAA has previously banned states from hosting its championship events because of the use of Confederate symbolism or for laws that it believe discriminated against LGBTQ people.

Bailar said it would be valuable to have the NCAA take a similar position on this issue.

“I also know that NCAA’s jurisdiction is in college athletics and not in children’s sports. And many of these laws are about children’s sports. So I understand the discrepancy there,” he said. “But I mean, if you’re asking me do I want more support for trans people? The answer is going to be: absolutely yes.”

HEADLINE	01/12 Backlash: Chicago mayor campaign plan
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/12/lori-lightfoot-students-campaign-chicago-mayor
GIST	<p>Chicago’s mayor, Lori Lightfoot, is facing criticism after her office attempted to recruit students with school credit to help with her re-election campaign.</p> <p>Emails encouraging students to volunteer were sent to several Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers’ work emails from Megan Crane, who identifies herself as Lightfoot’s deputy campaign manager on LinkedIn.</p> <p>According to screenshots that circulated on social media late on Wednesday, Lightfoot’s office asked teachers to encourage their students to submit their résumés for an externship program for those “interested in campaign politics and eager to gain experience in the field”.</p> <p>Those who join the externship would be expected to contribute 12 hours a week in exchange for “class credit”, WTTW first reported.</p> <p>The email further elaborated that Lightfoot’s office was seeking “enthusiastic, curious and hard-working young people eager to help Mayor Lightfoot win this spring”.</p> <p>Many were quick to call out Lightfoot’s office for the recruitment attempts.</p> <p>“Looks like desperate times call for desperate measures,” tweeted the Illinois representative and Chicago mayoral candidate Jesús García.</p> <p>Mayoral candidate Brandon Johnson wrote on Twitter that Lightfoot’s actions were “outrageous, desperate, & downright unethical”.</p> <p>Former Chicago inspector general Joe Ferguson also called the initiative “deeply, deeply problematic”.</p> <p>The solicitation of volunteers using the CPS email system is specifically discouraged in an ethics guideline published by CPS, though Lightfoot’s campaign claimed to have used emails made publicly available, reported the Chicago Tribune.</p> <p>Shortly after the email was publicized, Lightfoot’s campaign sent out several follow-up statements about the emails.</p> <p>In one statement, Lightfoot’s campaign wrote that staff would “cease contact with CPS employees” out of an “abundance of caution”, reported the Tribune.</p> <p>Less than two hours after that statement, Lightfoot’s campaign announced that contacting “any city of Chicago, or other sister agency employees, including CPS employees, even through publicly available sources” would be “off limits”.</p> <p>In light of the controversy, a spokesperson from CPS told the Tribune that the school district does not “coordinate with any political candidates or campaigns”, highlighting that teacher emails are publicly available.</p> <p>But leadership from the Chicago Teachers Union called the recruitment efforts “unethical and wrong”, noting concern that teachers who decline to participate in volunteer efforts or do not encourage their students to do so could face retaliation.</p> <p>“This is the same mayor who promised to clean up corruption and make good ethics an anchor in her administration. This latest scheme shows she’s a rank hypocrite on ethics issues – including her attempt to</p>

	<p>use our schools and students as her campaign tools,” wrote union leaders in a statement, reported WGN 9, a local news affiliate.</p> <p>The Chicago board of ethics told WGN that they were aware of the emails and planned to discuss it at the next board meeting, currently scheduled for 23 January.</p> <p>The Chicago mayoral election will be held on 28 February.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 China Covid everywhere, few restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-covid-dropped-restrictions-reopen-xi-11673534796?mod=hp_listb_pos2
GIST	<p>CHONGQING, China—A month after scrapping most of its zero-Covid restrictions, China is experiencing all at once what many other nations have been navigating for three years.</p> <p>Infections have skyrocketed, medical facilities are stretched to their limits and the elderly and infirm are dying, although official government numbers are seen by public-health experts as vastly underestimating Covid-related deaths.</p> <p>At the same time, parts of the economy are bouncing back as commuters pack subways and restaurants, workers resume normal routines and domestic tourists are once again on the move.</p> <p>It is a combustible mix and the outcome is particularly difficult to predict. No other country instituted zero-tolerance measures as widely for as long—and few shed controls as abruptly.</p> <p>Recent interviews with doctors, business owners and other urban and rural residents reveal both optimism and trepidation, as well as resentment among those with family members who have died, who blame the government for acting recklessly.</p> <p>There are a wide range of possibilities for what comes next, from a relatively quick bout of infections followed by an economic rebound to a more serious public-health crisis, especially in poorer areas. How it plays out will have ramifications for Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s leadership for years to come.</p> <p>One doctor on the front lines of the Covid-19 outbreak in Chongqing, a sprawling city on the Yangtze River, said she had been treating around 160 patients a day recently, four times the normal level. At the busiest point of the day, she said, she saw patients nearly every two minutes, many in their 70s and 80s and suffering respiratory illnesses tied to Covid.</p> <p>“This situation is a huge contradiction,” said Xiao Yuan, 33 years old, who owns two coffee shops in Chongqing, including one adjacent to the emergency ward of a major hospital.</p> <p>During recent lockdowns in the city, she said, business owners like her were desperate to reopen, questioning the wisdom of a government policy that deprived them of a living. Now, families of Covid patients had been stopping by for coffee. “We’re faced with this really sad thing,” she said. “We’re learning that old people in our friends’ families are dying because of the reopening.”</p> <p>Before the December reopening, anger over the government’s zero-Covid approach sparked mass protests in Beijing and other cities, presenting the greatest public challenge to Mr. Xi in his decade-plus rule. Today, there is concern about a hidden surge of deaths as Covid-19 spreads across the countryside, where healthcare is less developed.</p> <p>During the Lunar New Year holiday travel period, which runs from early January to mid-February, Chinese people are expected to crisscross the country, making more than two billion trips, as they travel home to see family, in some cases for the first time since the pandemic started. Many will carry the virus with them.</p>

The government has made it clear that its priority is restoring the economy to the engine of growth it once was, with planners aiming for greater than 5% growth in gross domestic product this year. After years of dire warnings about Covid's dangers, officials now [are portraying the Omicron variant as significantly weaker than earlier strains](#), encouraging workers to get back to their normal routines, even, in some cases, if they are testing positive.

[In his annual New Year's Eve address](#), Mr. Xi acknowledged that some had suffered as a result of his Covid policies, but sounded an optimistic note, saying "the light of hope is right in front of us."

Over the weekend, taking advantage of loosened travel restrictions, domestic tourists strolled around Chongqing's historic sites and streamed into its teahouses, while thousands of revelers attended an outdoor light show.

Subway ridership was up across the country in the first week of January after plummeting in several cities in previous weeks, while road traffic had mostly recovered from a 20% drop in late December, according to data compiled by [Goldman Sachs](#).

On [Baidu](#) Inc.'s search engine, however, queries for antiviral drugs such as Paxlovid soared at the end of December and remain elevated.

Before they stopped publicizing daily pandemic data on Jan. 9, health authorities were reporting fewer than 15,000 new Covid infections a day and daily deaths in the single digits—numbers that the World Health Organization criticized earlier this month as [underestimating the toll](#).

Minutes from a Dec. 21 meeting show China's top health officials inferred that almost 250 million people in the first 20 days of the month had been infected. On Monday, health officials in Henan [said nearly 90% of the central Chinese province's 100 million people had been infected](#) as of the previous Friday.

The Omicron variant has been spreading fast through a population that had little previous exposure to the virus and limited access to cutting-edge vaccines or treatments. Few deaths are being officially attributed to Covid-19, but doctors and family members of those who have died blame the virus for long lines of bodies waiting to be processed at crematories.

London-based health analytics firm Airfinity estimated in late November that a lifting of zero-Covid measures in China could lead to between 1.3 million and 2.1 million deaths. That works out to between 92 and 150 deaths per 100,000, still lower than the [333 per 100,000 in the U.S.](#)

Sherry Zhou was following developments in China from her home in the U.S. when she received a text message on Dec. 23 from her mother saying her 77-year-old father wasn't doing well. Ms. Zhou knew that her father, who had been in a hospital in Shanghai for more than a year following a lung infection, had developed a fever that hit 104 degrees two days earlier, but she had been reassured by reports that antiviral drugs such as Paxlovid were available in China.

Ms. Zhou said she called her mother, who was sick with Covid and had trouble communicating. She then called the orderly taking care of her father, who also was sick with Covid. She recalled the orderly telling her: "Your dad might not make it," and that the hospital was able to give him oxygen but had no antivirals.

Ms. Zhou and her sister, also in the U.S., scoured the internet for antivirals that could be administered to their father but came up empty-handed. Six hours after her mom's text, Ms. Zhou's father died.

Publicly released Chinese-government data show eight Covid deaths in China from the beginning of December to the day Mr. Zhou died. None were in Shanghai.

“Look at how little the regime did to prepare for opening up society,” said Ms. Zhou. “They knew the consequence of the shortage of lifesaving medications, but they still went ahead.”

In response to a request for comment, China’s National Health Commission referred to a press briefing in late December in which health officials described the reopening as well timed and said pharmaceutical companies in the country are stepping up efforts to manufacture cold medicines and develop drugs to treat Covid.

A delivery worker in Shanghai said he sees white flower wreaths every day hanging on the doors of the apartments where he makes deliveries, a sign that the family has had a death.

To earn a living, he said, he had been compelled to sleep outside during a monthslong lockdown in the city last year because apartment buildings wouldn’t allow residents to come and go. He said he also worked briefly as a zero-Covid enforcer, but lost his job when the policy was scrapped. He became infected himself and he had trouble breathing for 10 days, he said.

“This disease isn’t a common cold,” he said repeatedly, accusing authorities of hiding the scale of the virus’s toll.

Yin Yu, a 52-year-old office worker in the inland city of Lanzhou, said most of her family and friends had contracted the virus in recent weeks but recovered largely without needing medical help. “If you can’t control the virus, you might as well open up,” she said, adding that people couldn’t bear the lockdowns any longer. “The rest of the world has already moved on.”

State media portrays zero-Covid as a success and has played down the wave of new infections. Recent reports have stressed how current Covid-19 variants are less dangerous than earlier ones.

Derek Lin, a technology product manager in the southern city of Shenzhen, is among those who said they wish the government had relaxed its Covid-control policies sooner. He watched celebrations among his friends on the Chinese messaging platform WeChat when the government lifted Covid restrictions last month.

When Mr. Lin himself contracted Covid, he reflected on what many in China have come to see as wasted time. He said the government had long succeeded in curbing Covid, but was too slow to adapt when the more contagious Omicron variant emerged. “I felt I did nothing this year,” he said.

In Chongqing, subway ridership was up 30% to start the year. On a recent night, pedestrians packed a popular street lined with food stalls. Most tables at a local steakhouse were full.

Restaurant owner You Hui said business dropped by two-thirds after the loosening of Covid controls as many people grew sick or became scared to go out to eat. Since then, she said, business has partially recovered, and is now down by about a third.

Large but orderly crowds filled emergency rooms last week at several hospitals in Chongqing, with some patients requiring supplemental oxygen or intravenous drips. Pharmacies in the city appeared to be well-stocked with fever medicines that previously had run short in some places.

A potentially bigger challenge looms as the virus reaches more rural areas with inferior medical care. The Chongqing hospital doctor said she saw patients arriving at her hospital from the countryside because ventilators in rural counties were all in use.

In Fengdu County, 70 miles down the Yangtze River from central Chongqing, residents said the Lunar New Year migration was already under way. Teslas, Mercedes and a couple of Bentleys with out-of-town license plates from wealthier coastal regions are cruising its streets and country roads.

HEADLINE	01/12 Cancer death rate dropped 1/3 rd since 1991
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-cancer-death-rate-has-dropped-by-a-third-since-1991-11673535327?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>The cancer mortality rate in the U.S. has dropped by a third in the past three decades, a report showed, but an increase in advanced prostate cancer diagnoses threatens to reverse some hard-won gains.</p> <p>The American Cancer Society said Thursday that changes in preventive measures and screening in the past decade drove important trends in U.S. cancer incidence and outcomes. Cervical cancer rates dropped 65% from 2012 to 2019 among women in their early 20s after a generation of young women were vaccinated against human papillomavirus, or HPV, for the first time.</p> <p>But a decline in the use of a controversial test for prostate cancer likely led to more men getting diagnosed at later stages, the report found, with the highest incidence and mortality among Black men. The ACS said it would invest in research on prostate cancer and programs to boost access to quality screening and treatment.</p> <p>“There’s a significant call to arms,” said Karen Knudsen, ACS’s chief executive officer. “We are not catching these cancers early when we have an opportunity to cure men of prostate cancer.”</p> <p>The report was published in the journal CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians. The authors at ACS analyzed federal and state cancer registries for data on cancer rates through 2019 and federal mortality data through 2020, the report said.</p> <p>Cancer is the second-leading cause of death in the U.S., behind heart disease, with nearly 2 million cases and some 610,000 deaths estimated to occur in 2023, the ACS said. The decline in smoking rates in the U.S., better early detection and innovative treatments including immunotherapy drugs have driven a drop in death rates since 1991, the report said, averting an estimated 3.8 million cancer deaths in that time.</p> <p>The vaccine for HPV, a sexually transmitted virus that can cause cervical and other types of cancer, is one success story, ACS said. The Food and Drug Administration approved the first HPV vaccine in 2006 for girls and women ages 9 to 26. The youngest in that group are now adults, and cervical cancer rates for women in their early 20s have dropped more than expected from screening alone.</p> <p>Rates even among unvaccinated women in that age group declined to a lesser degree, suggesting a herd immunity-like effect from the vaccine reducing the virus’s spread, the report said.</p> <p>“It’s really, really remarkable,” said Elizabeth Platz, a professor of epidemiology and co-leader of the Cancer Prevention and Control Program at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins. “It’s a cancer that we could almost eliminate through the combination of screening and vaccination.”</p> <p>Dr. Platz said a remaining challenge is increasing HPV vaccine uptake. In 2021, 79% of U.S. adolescent girls had received at least one dose, and 64% were up-to-date, ACS said. The vaccine was also approved for boys and young men in 2009, and doctors said they were optimistic that the vaccine could similarly affect other HPV-related cancers.</p> <p>For prostate cancer, the second leading cause of cancer death among men after lung cancer, rates of advanced diagnoses have risen about 4.5% annually since 2011, the report found. The proportion of men diagnosed with later-stage disease has doubled. Declines in mortality rates have leveled off.</p> <p>The shift is due at least in part to changing guidelines and controversy surrounding the prostate cancer screening tool, called a PSA test, cancer epidemiologists said. The PSA test looks in the blood for levels of a prostate-specific antigen, or PSA, which can be higher among men with prostate cancer and other conditions. The test was deployed widely when it was introduced, causing a surge in detected prostate cancer cases in the early 1990s.</p>

Many cases, however, were slow-growing or asymptomatic. Evidence on the screen's overall benefit in preventing deaths was mixed, and doctors said some patients would undergo unnecessary biopsies or [treatments that could cause harm](#).

A government-backed task force [recommended against the test](#) for older men in 2008 and all men in 2012, after which detected incidence rates fell again. Following additional research, the group said in 2018 that men ages 55 to 69 should decide with their doctor whether to undergo the test, concluding that its risks and benefits were closely balanced for men in that age group.

"We're seeing some of the consequences of diminished screening," said Dr. Jonathan Shoag, associate professor of urology at University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center and Case Western Reserve University, who has studied PSA testing for prostate cancer. "We're not detecting cancers we don't want to know about, but the cancers that we're finding are worse cancers."

Black men might benefit more from PSA screening, the ACS report said. Prostate cancer mortality rates are two to four times higher for Black men compared with those in other groups.

The ACS said that it is revising its screening guidance and that researchers are exploring what might increase risk for aggressive disease to better target screening and treatment. Doctors could use PSA test results, combined with tools such as better MRI imaging and genetic information, to make more informed decisions about their patients' cancer risk and how best to proceed, ACS executives said.

"We can no longer stand back and not act," ACS's Dr. Knudsen said.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Atmospheric river hits Puget Sound region
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3777812/atmospheric-river-expected-to-impact-puget-sound-on-thursday/
GIST	<p>Update:</p> <p>The Northwest Avalanche Center in Seattle has issued an Avalanche Warning for the west slopes of the Cascades from the Canadian border to King County, including the mountains in the Mount Baker area, Highway 542, Highway 20 west, and the Mountain Loop Highway. The warning is in effect until 6 p.m. Thursday.</p> <p>Highway 2 is currently closed east of Stevens Pass near Coles Corner through Tumwater Canyon in the Leavenworth area due to avalanche concerns. The stretch of highway was closed at midnight on Wednesday, and there is no estimated time for reopening.</p> <p>Rainfall totals in the Cascades from Thursday night through Friday are expected to be in the range of 2 to 5 inches below 5,000 feet, according to KIRO 7 Meteorologist Nick Allard.</p> <p>As the atmospheric river moves in, the National Weather Service has issued a special weather statement warning residents of Puget Sound about a risk of landslides.</p> <p>The advisory applies to much of the state, from Bellingham at the north end to Centralia to the south; from the Olympic Mountains on the west end to the Cascades in the east.</p> <p>Kayla Mazurkiewicz, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Seattle, said the soil was already retaining water before this atmospheric river, and now, heavy rain through the weekend could trigger the ground to shift.</p> <p>"The soil's already had moisture in it," she said. "So heavy rainfall means areas could have landslides happen just because the soil is so moist."</p>

“Olympics, Cascade Mountains, areas near there could definitely have impact, only because there’s going to be more moisture in those areas, but definitely anywhere could be possible because the soil is so saturated,” Mazurkiewicz added.

Between one and three inches of rain are forecast for the lowlands through Saturday, and five to eight inches over the Olympics.

Original:

You know that sound you hear when it is raining hard, and you’re sitting in your home or office? You are going to hear that sound on Thursday.

“It will be a real soaker,” KIRO Newsradio meteorologist Ted Buehner said. “I expect 1-3 inches of rain in the lowlands with the possibility of ten inches of snow in the Cascades.”

Ted said the soil is already saturated and the new rain will increase landslide risks. “Especially on steep slopes like in West Seattle, Magnolia, and the rail line from Edmonds to Mukilteo.”

[The National Weather Service in Seattle](#) reports the rain will begin Wednesday night and go through early Friday.

The cause of all this is “a large area of low pressure ... pushing more atmospheric river moisture into California. That low will rotate around a wave that will move the atmospheric river into our area starting tonight,” reports [KIRO 7 meteorologist Nick Allard](#). “Once it starts, we can expect rain to last through a good part of Friday, with Thursday being the heaviest rain day.”

Nick also said that this soaker will probably bring some urban flooding “where rainwater cannot drain quickly enough.

“The Skokomish River in Mason County will be in flood stage (as it has been for much of the last week), but the Cascades rivers – while running high – will probably only reach minor flood stage or stay below flood stage into the weekend,” Nick continued. “Any eastward shift of the projected band of heavy rain over the Olympic Peninsula would change that river flooding forecast.”

Ted says the forecast will calm down on Friday, but not before dropping heavy snow above 6-7,000 feet in the mountains.

“This will create the possibility for avalanche’s in the North Cascades,” Ted said. “Mountain snowpack will soak up most of the rain in the mountains meaning no flood risk is likely from the mountain tributaries.”

The entire West Coast will continue to be impacted. “California won’t get as much rain as last week, but because it’s all accumulating, things are going to be bad again,” Ted said.

Weather returns to normal over the weekend, but there’s a large weather system off the coast of Japan looming for the future.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Severe weather sweeps the South, 6 dead
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/us/tornadoes-severe-storms-weather-south.html
GIST	<p>OLD KINGSTON, Ala. — At least six people were killed on Thursday in Autauga County, Ala., the local sheriff’s office said, as storms and tornadoes left a trail of damage across the American South.</p> <p>Tens of thousands of customers were still without power in parts of Alabama and Georgia in the predawn hours of Friday morning, as power crews worked through the night and early reports of injuries and damages began to surface.</p>

Enrique Milian, who lives in Autauga County, said in an interview that several of his relatives, including two children, had been injured by an apparent tornado on Thursday as they left their mobile home and ran toward a family car.

The two children, his five-month-old and 1-year-old nephews, were hospitalized with chest injuries and are expected to survive, Mr. Milian said, standing near a dirt road where several mobile homes — including his own and those of his two brothers — had been destroyed.

Meteorologists were tracking 45 reports of tornadoes on across the South on Thursday, mostly in Alabama, and many were likely to be confirmed by the National Weather Service, Bob Oravec, a meteorologist at the agency, said by phone that night. A few had already been [confirmed](#) by local Weather Service offices.

Thunderstorms were forecast for parts of Central and South Florida on Friday, along with some [possible snow](#) in northern Alabama. More than 500,000 people living along the border of Tennessee and North Carolina were [under a winter storm warning](#) as of 3 a.m. on the East Coast.

But as of Thursday night, the threat of extreme weather across the South had passed, Mr. Oravec said, adding that all the tornado watches issued earlier in the day had expired.

“A lot of the worst of the weather, it appears, is over,” he said.

More than 6.8 million people across [Alabama](#) and [Georgia](#) had been under a tornado watch on Thursday, and the governors of both states declared states of emergency.

Alabama’s order applied to six counties, including Autauga, which has a population of just under 60,000 people and lies in the Appalachian foothills. In 2011, it was struck by a punishing storm system that [killed three people](#).

More than 23,000 customers in Alabama and more than 30,000 in Georgia were still without power on Friday morning, according to the tracking site [poweroutage.us](#). Utility crews were working to repair damage on along the storm’s path, although it was unclear whether all those outages were the result of the severe weather.

Videos and images from across the South showed felled trees as well as [damage to homes](#) and other buildings, but the extent of the injuries and property damage was not immediately clear.

Gary Weaver, deputy director of Autauga County’s Emergency Management Agency, said on Thursday that there were reports of injuries and damage, including felled power lines, throughout the county. Mr. Weaver said that his office had received reports of some injuries, but that it was not clear how many people had been hurt, or how badly.

In Tallapoosa County, Ala., a trooper from the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency was taken to the hospital with injuries after a tree fell and hit his car, crushing it, according to images and a statement [posted on Facebook](#) Thursday.

In Butts County, Ga., a few dozen miles southeast of Atlanta, the deputy county manager, J. Michael Brewer, [said on Twitter](#) early on Friday that the storms had badly damaged mobile homes and toppled some fully grown trees.

Further west in Spalding County, Ga., the sheriff’s office reported that downed trees were blocking roadways, and announced that schools and the county courthouse would be closed on Friday.

The storms also [left students trapped](#) on Thursday at four Spalding County middle schools. Students from two of the schools later made it home safely, but officials were still working to help 24 children leave the other two schools, the Griffin-Spalding County School System [said on its website](#).

And in the county seat, Griffin, violent winds had torn apart buildings and felled trees, according to Jessica Diane Pitts, a resident. “You could hear stuff being ripped to pieces and people screaming in fear!” Ms. Pitts said in a Facebook message. “I hope I never experience something like this again!”

In Mississippi, the state’s emergency management agency [shared a video on Twitter](#) that showed a home in Monroe County that had been essentially flattened. Other houses nearby sustained roof damage, with debris littering the area.

“That home is completely destroyed,” Malarly White, a spokeswoman for the agency, said on Thursday.

Several severe thunderstorm warnings were also issued in the Atlanta area, including one for the area around Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, where the [Weather Service warned](#) of winds up to 60 miles per hour, quarter-size hail and a possible tornado.

And in Selma, Ala., videos and images that circulated on social media on Thursday showed damaged buildings, fallen trees and vehicles with broken windows. The Weather Service office in nearby Birmingham, Ala., [said on Twitter](#) that there had been “confirmed damage” in Selma.

The Selma mayor’s office [said in a statement](#) that the city had “received significant damage from the tornado.” It urged residents to refrain from driving and to avoid downed power lines.

At a news conference on Thursday evening, officials in Selma said they had received no reports of fatalities, but that there had been some injuries. A curfew was to be put in place from dusk to dawn across the city.

A man in Selma, Bobby Green, told [an ABC affiliate station](#) that he had survived flying debris by sheltering in his car.

“I thought it was all over for me,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Battle for small Ukraine town grinds on
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/12/world/russia-ukraine-news#the-fight-for-the-small-town-of-soledar-grinds-on-costing-lives
GIST	<p>Russia is building up its forces in Ukraine, a senior Ukrainian defense official said on Thursday, as Moscow’s forces struggle on in their bid to capture a small salt-mining town in the east that has largely been reduced to rubble.</p> <p>The battle over Soledar has become emblematic of Moscow’s labored and costly offensive in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>After days of intense street fighting, uncertainty over which side controlled the town of Soledar in Donetsk Province remained on Thursday, though there was no doubt about the devastation that had been wrought. Images released by the satellite company Maxar showed a score of apartment buildings and houses shattered beyond repair.</p> <p>Ukraine’s deputy defense minister, Hanna Maliar, said that “Russia is building up its forces in Ukraine but Ukrainian forces are holding out in fierce fighting for control of the eastern town of Soledar.”</p> <p>Citing the country’s intelligence service, she said that Russia was moving troops trained in Belarus and Russia to the combat zone to focus on Donetsk and Luhansk Provinces in the east of the country.</p>

Soledar and a number of other locations in the Bakhmut region “were subject to tank, mortar, barrel and rocket artillery attacks,” according to an update from Ukraine’s General Staff of the Armed Forces.

The general staff bulletin claimed that about 100 Russian soldiers had been killed by Ukrainian special forces working with other frontline teams. It was not possible to confirm the figure independently.

“The enemy is suffering great losses,” said Serhiy Cherevaty, a spokesman for Ukraine’s eastern forces.

The Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, said Thursday that “a huge amount of work has been done” in the battle for Soledar, but that “there is still a lot of work ahead.”

While it is technically a city, Soledar had a prewar population of just 10,000 people. It lies about six miles from Bakhmut, a town with a prewar population of 70,000 that Russian forces have targeted since the summer, pouring in troops and attacking with artillery in the surrounding towns and villages.

Russia sees Bakhmut as a gateway to the complete conquest of Donbas, the industrial region that includes Donetsk Province. Moscow seized part of the region in 2014 and established breakaway republics.

The Kremlin on Wednesday named Gen. Valery Gerasimov, who helped plan Russia’s stumbling invasion in February and who had served as Mr. Putin’s military chief of general staff for over a decade, to replace Gen. Sergei Surovikin as the head of Russian forces in Ukraine.

But that failed to reassure some Russian commentators, whose critical views of the conduct of the war have become increasingly influential.

“The sum does not change, just by changing the places of its parts,” wrote one prominent blogger who goes by the name Rybar.

If Russia were to take Soledar, it would be the first victory for Moscow’s forces after months of territorial gains by Ukraine in the northeast and south.

“Ukraine starts the year in better shape than Russia. The Ukrainian Armed Force have momentum,” said Mick Ryan, a recently retired Australian Army major general, noting the growing impact of air defense systems and weapons, which may soon include tanks, being supplied to Ukraine by its allies in Washington and Europe.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Pentagon: ‘systemic problems’ Russia army
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/12/world/russia-ukraine-news#the-pentagon-says-systemic-problems-in-russias-army-led-to-its-military-shake-up
GIST	<p>Russia’s abrupt replacement of its war commander in Ukraine this week is likely a reflection of the same struggles the Russian military has faced since the start of the conflict, a Pentagon spokesman said on Thursday.</p> <p>Gen. Sergei Surovikin, who led Russian forces in Syria, was demoted after just three months of leading the war effort in Ukraine, and his command was given to Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov, the Kremlin’s top military officer, who helped plan the botched invasion in February.</p> <p>Brig. Gen. Patrick S. Ryder, the Pentagon spokesman, said the shake-up likely reflects systemic obstacles the Russian military has encountered, including “logistics problems, command and control problems, sustainment problems, morale and the large failure to achieve the strategic objectives that they’ve set for themselves.”</p>

“Frankly,” he added, “I think that the world would rather see Russia focus on withdrawing from Ukraine and saving innocent lives versus spending time on numerous management reshuffles. Russian soldiers and their families would probably like to see that too.”

Analysts do not expect the change in leadership to alter much about Russian forces’ consistent difficulties in Ukraine.

General Gerasimov is unlikely to meet President Vladimir Putin’s “unrealistic expectations for his performance,” the Institute for the Study of War said in a report on Wednesday, adding that he would likely be presiding over “a disorganized command structure plagued by endemic, persistent, and self-reinforcing failures that he largely set into motion in his initial role before the invasion of Ukraine.”

The reshuffling of commanders also failed to reassure some Russian commentators, whose critical views of the conduct of the war have become increasingly influential. General Gerasimov’s appointment was likely intended, at least in part, to ward off further criticism, the institute’s report said.

Russia’s Defense Ministry has also faced challenges to its authority from Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner mercenary group, who claimed on Tuesday to have seized the eastern Ukrainian town of Soledar and given Russia its first significant victory in months — a claim the Kremlin later walked back.

The ousted General Surovikin had been a “favorite” of Mr. Prigozhin’s, the institute noted, calling his demotion part of a Kremlin effort to have its military come out on top in “an internal Russian power struggle.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Top military commander leads war effort
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/12/world/russia-ukraine-news#who-is-gerasimov-russia
GIST	<p>Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov, who has been named the new chief of Moscow’s war effort in Ukraine, is Russia’s highest-ranking military officer. He has often been described as the real head of the Russian military, rather than defense officials in the Kremlin.</p> <p>General Gerasimov is replacing Gen. Sergei Surovikin, who had only been in the job three months and had previously headed Russian forces in Syria.</p> <p>Some analysts say the move suggests that the Kremlin is looking to streamline the decision-making process with regard to the war effort, and wants a leader who is ready to carry out decisions coming directly from the top.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials and some in the West have said that Russia will soon try to launch a new offensive.</p> <p>In its statement on Wednesday announcing General Gerasimov’s appointment, Russia’s defense ministry hinted at a renewed campaign, tying the decision to the “increased scale” of Russia’s war effort in Ukraine.</p> <p>The statement also cited the need “to organize closer interaction” between various troop formations” and increase “the effectiveness of management of troops.”</p> <p>Mark Galeotti, who studies Russian security affairs, said on Twitter that the move was “confirmation, if we needed it, that there will be serious offensives coming, and that even Putin recognizes that poor coordination has been an issue.”</p> <p>The move is “at least the most poisoned of chalices,” Mr. Galeotti said. “It’s now on him, and I suspect Putin has unrealistic expectations again.”</p> <p>The appointment is also seen as an attempt to keep in check the increasingly vocal Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose Wagner group mercenaries have publicly criticized General Gerasimov.</p>

General Gerasimov, 67, was in charge of planning and executing Russia's recent operations in Syria and its troubled invasion of Ukraine in February, which did not go to plan. He has had a long career in the military, rising through the ranks from a Soviet-era platoon commander to Russia's top brass.

That puts General Gerasimov in contrast with Sergei K. Shoigu, who as defense minister is in charge of the Russian Army but has never served in the military himself.

General Gerasimov "is the de facto head of the armed forces," said Dmitri Kuznets, a military analyst for the Russian-language news outlet Meduza. He said the fact that General Gerasimov was willing to carry out Russia's invasion of Ukraine — a plan that was clearly impossible from a military standpoint — showed that he was "unscrupulous" and ready to take orders from the Kremlin, in contrast to General Surovikin.

"We have seen it at the beginning of the war," said Mr. Kuznets, "when he planned the impossible operation at Putin's orders."

General Gerasimov will be in charge of a grinding war against an army supported by the world's most advanced militaries and capable of dealing painful and embarrassing defeats to Russia.

General Gerasimov was born in the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia's southwest, in Kazan, a city at the confluence of the Volga and Kazanka Rivers. In 1977, he graduated from a tank academy and then served in the Russian Far East, according to his [official biography](#). He quickly rose through the ranks, serving all across the Soviet Union.

Following the Soviet collapse, he served as an army commander during the second Chechen War. In 2012, in a major reshuffle of military commanders, he was appointed head of the Russian General Staff.

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HEADLINE	01/12 IMF: global recession might be averted
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/12/world/russia-ukraine-news#a-worldwide-recession-might-be-averted-the-imf-chief-says-but-the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-caveat
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The International Monetary Fund expects that global economic growth will begin to rebound later this year and that a worldwide recession can be averted if China continues to ease its pandemic restrictions and Russia's war in Ukraine does not worsen.</p> <p>Kristalina Georgieva, the managing director of the I.M.F., expressed optimism on Thursday that the recent run of downgrades to global growth could be coming to an end and that an economic expansion could accelerate next year. Her comments, made to reporters during a briefing at the I.M.F. headquarters in Washington, suggested that the storm clouds hanging over the world economy could soon dissipate. The I.M.F., which is expected to release its new global forecasts later this month, projected last October that world output would slow to 2.7 percent in 2023 from 3.2 percent in 2022.</p> <p>"We think we've bottomed out," Ms. Georgieva said. "We are going to see, toward the end of 2023, hopefully a reversal in trend toward a higher growth trajectory in 2024."</p> <p>Despite her optimism, Ms. Georgieva warned that this would be a "tough year" and that the global economy continues to be fragile. She noted that inflation remains stubbornly high and that the cost of living crisis was not over.</p> <p>Ms. Georgieva said it was impossible to predict what crisis was around the corner and that the world economy was more prone to shocks. The outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine is particularly hard to predict, and it remains unclear how long labor markets can continue to be resilient in the face of rising interest rates.</p>

	Earlier this week, the World Bank projected that global growth would slow to 1.7 percent this year, a sharp downgrade from its previous projection of 3 percent, and warned of a “crisis” facing developing economies.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Eggs here or there? Find them anywhere?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/us/egg-shortage-us.html
GIST	<p>A grocery staple that for decades has been a relatively cheap and reliable item has now become an elusive and even lavishly priced commodity.</p> <p>At a Whole Foods in Manhattan on Wednesday, shelves were empty for the cheapest eggs — \$3.39 for a carton of 12 large brown Grade A eggs.</p> <p>What remained were more expensive options like organic, cage-free eggs for more than \$7. Even then, the customers were limited to two egg cartons, according to a sign on the refrigerator door, “due to a nationwide shortage of eggs.” Other grocery stores, like certain locations of Kroger across the United States and Lidl in Britain, have also limited egg purchases. Prices of eggs across some countries are rising sharply.</p> <p>One factor behind the shortage and the sharp rise in egg prices is an outbreak of avian influenza, also known as the bird flu, a highly contagious virus that is often fatal to chickens. Since the outbreak was detected last February, more than 57 million birds in hundreds of commercial and backyard flocks have been affected by it, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.</p> <p>Infected or exposed flocks are culled to prevent the virus from spreading, a measure that has resulted in the depopulation of more than 44 million laying hens in the U.S. since the outbreak, according to the Agriculture Department. The depopulations at commercial facilities have decreased the domestic egg supply by about 7.5 percent on average each month since the outbreak began, the department said.</p> <p>Lyndsay Cole, a spokeswoman with the Agriculture Department’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said that after facilities are sanitized and restocked with healthy laying hens, it takes about four to five months for them to “reach peak productivity” of about 24 eggs per month.</p> <p>The virus has also been detected around the world, including in Canada and countries in Europe and South America, according to United Egg Producers, the trade group that represents most commercial egg farmers in the United States.</p> <p>Emily Metz, president and chief executive of the American Egg Board, said in an interview on Wednesday that while bird flu has played a role, increasing costs of fuel, feed and packaging have also contributed to pricier and scarcer eggs.</p> <p>“Is avian flu a factor? Yes,” Ms. Metz said. “Is it the only factor? No, and I would argue it’s not even the biggest factor in where these prices are right now.”</p> <p>Combined, the avian flu and other rising costs have created scenes of empty shelves at grocery stores across the country, from Colorado to New York. In some instances, people have resorted to buying their own chickens, local media in Arizona and Massachusetts have reported.</p> <p>While the shortages have not been dire, the jump in prices is noticeable for consumers and businesses. In January 2022, the average price for a dozen of large Grade A eggs in the U.S. was \$1.39, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By November, the average price had increased to \$3.59.</p> <p>Ben Suh, the owner of Between the Bagel NY in Queens, said that he had tried to hold off on raising prices for as long as he could, but that he would soon increase the cost of menu items with eggs. For instance, the price of a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich will increase to \$7 from \$6, Mr. Suh said.</p>

“Everyone’s been struggling since the pandemic began, so we’ve been trying to keep our prices down,” Mr. Suh said.

A year ago, Mr. Suh said he would typically pay \$70 to \$80 for 30 dozen eggs. Now, he is paying \$150 to \$160 for the same order, he said.

“Everything’s doubled,” Mr. Suh said, adding that because of inflation, he has also had to pay more for other products, including bacon and coffee.

At Brey’s Egg Farm in Jeffersonville, N.Y., flocks of chickens have been spared from the avian flu. Daniel Brey, the farm’s owner, said that after a destructive nationwide [avian flu outbreak in 2014 and 2015](#) killed more than 50 million birds, he set up a gate around his farm to prevent wild birds from entering and potentially spreading diseases.

Mr. Brey said that vehicles entering the farm were sprayed with disinfectant, another precaution to protect the farm, which produces [228,000 eggs daily](#).

“This stuff is so contagious,” Mr. Brey said of the bird flu. “You’ve got to be careful everywhere.”

While the avian flu rarely infects humans, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the contagiousness of the virus requires farmers to quickly euthanize infected and exposed flocks.

“This virus is fatal,” Ms. Metz said. “Once it comes into contact with your flock, it will kill your birds.”

Because there have been fewer reported cases of avian flu at commercial egg-laying facilities in recent weeks, Mr. Brey said that he believed the egg shortage would ease soon, as well as the high prices. But Mr. Brey said he was concerned that cases could rebound in the spring and spread to other birds, such as geese, ducks, hawks and eagles.

So far this year, recorded cases of the avian flu dropped significantly, with only one commercial flock and 10 backyard flocks affected, according to the Agriculture Department, compared with more than 5.07 million birds in December and more than 3.75 million birds in November.

A statement last week from United Egg Producers echoed that assessment, saying that there was an expected lull in the virus over the next two months, but the group warned of “detections rapidly increasing as spring and the migration season renews.”

Ms. Cole said that as farms restocked, supply would likely improve, but she cautioned that the virus was still lingering within the United States.

“We know there will continue to be a threat to domestic birds as long as the HPAI virus is circulating in wild birds, so all bird owners should continue to be vigilant,” Ms. Cole said, referring to the avian virus.

For now, stores including some Kroger, Whole Foods and Lidl locations are limiting egg purchases for customers.

A Kroger spokeswoman said that the bird flu had caused “tens of millions of birds to be removed from the U.S. supply chain and egg production over the last nine months,” but that Kroger’s “egg supply remains adequate.”

A Lidl spokesman said that “in periods of high demand relative to product supply, as retailers nationally see today with eggs, our stores may place temporary quantity limits on high-demand products.”

Ms. Metz said that as the avian flu lingers, farmers will have to continue to manage outbreaks of the virus, measures they are better prepared to take after the experience of the 2014-2015 outbreak.

	“We’re recovering so much more quickly than we did in 2015,” Ms. Metz said. “Managing the virus is just going to be that much better, and it’s going to be much less of a factor as we go forward in pricing.”
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HEADLINE	01/12 Off-duty officers to patrol Bellevue schools
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/bellevue-schools-hire-off-duty-cops-as-district-weighs-future-of-school-resource-officers#
GIST	<p>BELLEVUE, Wash. — The Bellevue School District (BSD) is hiring off-duty police officers to provide security while district leaders decide the future of a program that would bring police officers back into schools.</p> <p>The district ordered school resource officers off their campuses in 2021, citing that "the presence of officers in BSD schools had become contentious".</p> <p>While the district did not say how many off-duty officers are currently working in BSD schools, BSD spokesperson Janine Thorn said the decision to hire off-duty cops was done "out of an abundance of caution."</p> <p>"The Bellevue School District is and remains in partnership with the Bellevue Police Department on all safety and security matters. Additional off-duty officers have been hired out of an abundance of caution to further protect and actively reinforce our commitment to a healthy and safe learning environment for our staff and students," Thorn wrote.</p> <p>The district is expected to update its proposed Community Engagement Officer (CEO) program in the coming weeks. The CEO program would be a partnership between BSD and Bellevue police with officers stationed at the central district office and then assigned to schools as needed.</p> <p>The district outlines the differences between the CEO program and their former school resource officer program on the district website.</p> <p>A Bellevue police spokesperson told KOMO News this week that the department is awaiting a decision from the district on if they want to implement the CEO program.</p> <p>KOMO reported in November that the Bellevue Education Association, which represents district educators, told the district it did not want the CEO program to move forward.</p> <p>The education association passed a resolution telling the district to instead pass budget actions to "reallocate resources for this program to further support wrap-around services necessary for our students and schools."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 State investigates Spokane gas stations
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/investigations/state-inspectors-investigate-complaints-watered-down-gas-spokane/293-e51cb3d8-7902-41ae-83cb-7ad3bd049f6d
GIST	<p>SPOKANE COUNTY, Wash. — KREM 2 first reported about a problem at the pump impacting drivers in the Spokane area, who tell us their fuel tanks were filled with gas contaminated with water at a number of gas stations.</p> <p>Since that first report, more people have emailed KREM 2 with the same issue, which is costing them hundreds or sometimes thousands of dollars in engine repairs.</p>

Corina Fletcher told KREM 2 she fueled up at the 76 station at Wandermere on December 27 with an online receipt to show her purchase. She also provided an invoice for an \$800 engine flush that her mechanic told us was necessary to fix the problem.

Fletcher says the main office for the 76 R&B Super Stop told her they wouldn't pay for the bill because she filled up with unleaded, but the issue was with their premium tank.

When KREM 2 called the office, we were also told the water leaked into the premium tank and that the company had already paid for numerous towing and repair bills for those customers. When we asked for an interview Wednesday, we were told we'd get a callback, though that didn't happen.

The station's representative did answer our call on Thursday with new information, though she couldn't speak on camera. She told us they're now paying for all customers who had contaminated gas.

They believe the extremely cold temperatures in December damaged a part in the premium tank, leaving it open and allowing water to leak in. They say they now think after premium customers pumped from that tank, residual contaminated fuel was left in the hose and got into other customers' tanks when they filled with regular.

You can contact the main office at (509) 892-5186 to start the reimbursement process, though they'll have to verify your fuel purchase first.

Other reports on social media show this wasn't the only gas station with the same issue, so KREM 2 is continuing to investigate how widespread this situation may be.

We contacted the [Weights and Measures division of the Washington Department of Agriculture](#), which regulates and inspects gas stations.

A program manager wasn't able to do an interview but told us the program is interested in investigating the issue.

KREM 2 has put in records requests for results from a random monthly quality test the division does on gas stations, as well as records from complaints about contaminated gas. Those records weren't immediately available.

The program manager does say the best way to launch an inspection at a gas station is to file a complaint; they want anyone impacted by watered-down fuel to do so by emailing wtsmeasures@agr.wa.gov or by calling (360) 902-2035.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Timeline of Biden documents case, so far
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/us/politics/biden-documents-timeline.html
GIST	<p>Attorney General Merrick B. Garland on Thursday provided a more detailed timeline regarding the discovery of classified documents from the Obama administration that had been found improperly stored in locations associated with President Biden.</p> <p>Here, based on Mr. Garland's statement and previous White House statements, is what we know about how events unfolded:</p> <p>Nov. 2: Mr. Biden's lawyers discovered a "small number" of classified documents in what the White House has described as a locked closet for an office Mr. Biden had used at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, a think tank in Washington. The administration said it reported this discovery to the National Archives that day.</p> <p>Nov. 3: The National Archives retrieved the materials from the closet, according to the administration.</p>

Nov. 4: Archives officials referred the matter to the Justice Department.

Nov. 14: Mr. Garland selected John R. Lausch Jr., the U.S. attorney in Chicago, to conduct a preliminary assessment of the material to determine whether a special counsel was needed.

Dec. 20: Mr. Biden's lawyers told Mr. Lausch that they had found a second set of classified documents in the garage of his house in Wilmington, Del., according to Mr. Garland. The administration separately said it "immediately" notified the Justice Department upon finding a "small number" of such files in a storage space in the garage as well as a single-page document in an adjacent room.

Jan. 5: Mr. Lausch told Mr. Garland that a special counsel was warranted.

Jan. 9: CBS News reported on the existence of the documents found at the Penn Biden Center. The White House [acknowledged the matter](#) in a statement but made no reference to the documents found at the president's home in Wilmington.

Jan. 10: Mr. Biden [told reporters in Mexico City](#) that he was "surprised" to learn in the fall that classified documents had been taken to his former office at the think tank, but he did not disclose that more documents had been found.

Jan. 11: [NBC News](#) reported that a second batch of classified records had been found, but without details like when and where. It would later become clear this was the batch found in the garage on Dec. 20.

Jan. 12: The White House publicly acknowledged that documents had been found in Mr. Biden's garage, along with one additional document that had been "discovered among stored materials in an adjacent room." A search of the Biden home in Rehoboth Beach, Del., did not uncover any documents, the administration said. Officials did not describe when that search was carried out. Mr. Garland announced he was appointing Robert K. Hur as special counsel to investigate.

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HEADLINE	01/12 DOJ appoints special counsel for probe
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/us/politics/biden-documents.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&module=&state=default&region=footer&context=breakout link back to briefing
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Attorney General Merrick B. Garland appointed a special counsel on Thursday to investigate how classified documents had ended up in President Biden's private office and home, opening a new legal threat to the White House and providing ammunition to its Republican opponents.</p> <p>Mr. Garland assigned Robert K. Hur, a veteran prosecutor who worked in the Trump administration, to examine "the possible unauthorized removal and retention of classified documents or other records discovered" at Mr. Biden's think tank in Washington and his residence in Wilmington, Del., according to an order signed by the attorney general.</p> <p>The White House promised to fully cooperate while insisting prosecutors would find only unintentional errors. People close to the situation said several Biden associates had already been interviewed. But the decision to open a full investigation put both the president and the attorney general in awkward positions at the same time another special counsel appointed by Mr. Garland considers whether to charge former President Donald J. Trump or his associates with mishandling sensitive documents and obstructing efforts to retrieve them.</p> <p>The circumstances in the Biden and Trump cases are markedly different. Mr. Trump resisted requests to return documents for months, even after being subpoenaed, while as far as is known, Mr. Biden's lawyers found the papers without being asked and turned them over promptly. But as a political matter, the new</p>

investigation will muddy the case against Mr. Trump, who is already using it to argue that he is being selectively persecuted by the administration of a president he plans to challenge in 2024.

Mr. Biden, who excoriated Mr. Trump for being “irresponsible” with national secrets, now has to answer for his own team’s misplacement of sensitive papers. Moreover, his White House did not disclose to the public the discovery of the documents from his time as vice president for two months, waiting until after the November midterm elections, when it might have damaged Democrats.

And as a new timetable outlined by Mr. Garland on Thursday made clear, even then the White House did not fully reveal the extent of the situation in its original statement. That statement, released on Monday, confirmed a media report about a first batch discovered at his think tank in November but made no mention of a second batch found at his Delaware home in December.

Only on Thursday, three days after that initial statement, did the White House confirm media reports about the second batch, which was discovered in the garage of Mr. Biden’s home in Wilmington, and a final document found nearby on Wednesday night.

When a reporter asked Mr. Biden at an unrelated event on Thursday why classified documents were kept along with his prized Corvette, Mr. Biden replied: “My Corvette is in a locked garage. OK? So it’s not like they’re sitting out in the street.”

“But as I said earlier this week,” he added, “people know I take classified documents and classified material seriously. I also said we’re cooperating fully and completely with the Justice Department’s review.”

Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, said the president had not been informed in advance of Mr. Garland’s decision to appoint a special counsel. She declined to clarify what initially prompted the search, how long it progressed or why the White House did not inform the public earlier.

Mr. Biden, she said, “was kept informed throughout,” but does not know what is in the documents. “The search is complete, he is confident in this process, and I will leave it there,” she added.

But her account of the discovery of the original batch of documents appeared at odds with the Justice Department timetable. “We did this by the book, and what I mean by that is the moment that the lawyers discovered that the papers, the documents were there, they reached out to the archives, they reached out to the Department of Justice,” she said.

In fact, according to the department, the White House informed the National Archives and Records Administration but not Justice. The department learned about the documents only when notified by the archives. A person familiar with the Biden team’s thinking, who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive legal matters, said the president’s lawyers had contacted the archives with the understanding that it would inform other agencies that needed to know.

Once the Justice Department was brought in, the Biden team then dealt directly with prosecutors, including when the second batch and a final document were discovered. But it meant that the first batch was moved to the archives before the F.B.I. could examine them where they were originally found.

While White House officials privately played down the importance of Mr. Hur’s appointment, arguing that it would matter more in Washington political circles than in the rest of the nation, special prosecutor investigations have a way of distracting and even crippling a White House, especially if they spread beyond their original scope.

With the exception of President Barack Obama, every occupant of the Oval Office since Watergate has confronted a special prosecutor scrutinizing him or members of his staff, sometimes for relatively narrow matters but at other times for issues that have mushroomed into the threat of impeachment.

“An independent or special counsel investigation that touches on a White House can be significantly debilitating, especially if not isolated and managed,” said W. Neil Eggleston, who helped defend President Bill Clinton and represented a top aide to President George W. Bush during such inquiries before becoming White House counsel to Mr. Obama.

In the Clinton White House, “responding to the investigation would occupy large parts of the day of the senior staff, the White House Counsel’s Office and the communications group,” said Mr. Eggleston. “There is limited bandwidth each day, and hours taken up by responding to an investigation are lost.”

The decision to select a special counsel to look into the handling of the documents comes at an extraordinary moment for Mr. Garland, who in November tapped [Jack Smith](#), a [former war crimes and public corruption prosecutor](#), to lead the investigations into Mr. Trump’s mishandling of government documents as well as his actions related to the Capitol attack on Jan. 6, 2021.

The appointment of Mr. Hur on Thursday was intended to insulate the Justice Department from accusations of partisanship at a time when the new G.O.P. majority in the House has embarked on an aggressive and open-ended investigation into what they claim is the Biden administration’s use of government power against Republicans.

“I strongly believe that the normal processes of this department can handle all investigations with integrity,” Mr. Garland told reporters. “But under the regulations, the extraordinary circumstances here require the appointment of a special counsel for this matter. This appointment underscores for the public the department’s commitment to both independence and accountability in particularly sensitive matters, and to making decisions indisputably guided only by the facts and the law.”

Richard Sauber, a White House lawyer overseeing the response to investigations, said the president’s team would cooperate. “We are confident that a thorough review will show that these documents were inadvertently misplaced, and the president and his lawyers acted promptly upon discovery of this mistake,” he said in a statement.

Under Mr. Garland’s order, Mr. Hur is authorized to prosecute any crimes arising from the inquiry or to refer matters for prosecution by federal attorneys in other jurisdictions.

“I will conduct the assigned investigation with fair, impartial, and dispassionate judgment,” he said in a statement. “I intend to follow the facts swiftly and thoroughly, without fear or favor, and will honor the trust placed in me to perform this service.”

Mr. Hur, a partner at the white-collar law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, worked as an assistant federal prosecutor in Maryland from 2007 to 2014, then served in the deputy attorney general’s office in 2017 and 2018 during the Trump administration before being appointed U.S. attorney for Maryland, a position he left when Mr. Biden took office.

While U.S. attorney, Mr. Hur defied pressure from Mr. Trump’s Justice Department to prosecute John F. Kerry, Mr. Obama’s secretary of state, who drew Mr. Trump’s ire for arguing to preserve a nuclear agreement with Iran, according to Geoffrey S. Berman, a former Trump-era U.S. attorney in Manhattan. In his memoir, [“Holding the Line,”](#) Mr. Berman wrote that after refusing to prosecute Mr. Kerry, Mr. Hur was assigned to take over the matter and ultimately declined to pursue charges as well.

In his statement on Thursday, Mr. Garland filled in some, if not all, of the gaps in the public timeline surrounding the discovery of the documents in Mr. Biden’s home and office.

Mr. Biden’s lawyers discovered the first batch of classified papers, said to include briefing materials on foreign governments from his time as vice president, on Nov. 2, just six days before the midterm elections, as they were closing down his office at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement in Washington.

They alerted the archives, which retrieved them the next morning. Archives officials then informed the Justice Department on Nov. 4. The F.B.I. began an assessment of the situation on Nov. 9. On Nov. 14, Mr. Garland assigned John R. Lausch, the U.S. attorney in Chicago and a Trump appointee, to conduct a preliminary review to determine whether a special counsel was merited.

But the Biden team waited several weeks before coming to the conclusion, as Mr. Lausch's review proceeded, that they should make sure there were no more surprises and conduct a search of other Biden properties. On Dec. 20, they found the second batch in Mr. Biden's garage in Wilmington and notified Mr. Lausch. No classified papers were found at the president's vacation home in Rehoboth Beach, Del.

Mr. Lausch, who stood next to Mr. Garland in impassive silence on Thursday, told the attorney general on Jan. 5 that a special counsel was warranted but the Chicago prosecutor declined to take the role himself because he plans to leave for the private sector early this year.

Four days later, the White House issued its public statement confirming the discovery of the original batch of documents in response to a [CBS News report](#). On Wednesday night, as they completed their search, the Biden lawyers made a third discovery as they found one more single-page classified document in a room adjacent to the garage in Wilmington and notified the Justice Department. After media reports, the White House acknowledged publicly on Thursday that Mr. Biden's aides had found the additional documents.

A person familiar with the Biden team's thinking said lawyers did not want to announce what had happened until all the facts had been gathered. They were leery of offending Justice Department officials by going public prematurely and looking like they were litigating in the media, hoping that Mr. Lausch would conclude that no special counsel was needed.

Veteran law enforcement officials, however, said the Biden team raised questions by how they had acted after finding the first set of documents in November, particularly by notifying the archives but not the Justice Department or F.B.I., which are obligated to enforce laws related to the handling of national secrets.

"They created a situation in which the Justice Department was not directly involved initially," said Timothy Flanigan, a former deputy White House counsel and Justice Department official under George W. Bush.

"The documents instead were taken out of context and passed through other hands, giving the department no opportunity to review for itself what kind of security controls were around them and what other things they were stored with," he added.

Chuck Rosenberg, a former senior F.B.I. official, said bringing in the bureau at the beginning would have been wiser. "It is always better for the F.B.I. to know sooner, rather than later," he said. "These types of investigations tend not to get better with age."

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HEADLINE	01/12 Inflation is slowing but still lingering risks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/business/inflation-gas-discounts.html
GIST	<p>Inflation slowed on an annual basis for a sixth straight month in December, a relief for households and an encouraging signal for the Federal Reserve and the White House that the worst of America's pandemic-induced inflation burst may be in the past.</p> <p>The Consumer Price Index climbed 6.5 percent in the year through last month, down from 7.1 percent in the November reading, as prices declined on a monthly basis for the first time in more than two years. The annual inflation rate was the slowest since October 2021, a pullback driven by falling gas prices and cheaper airfares.</p>

Economists and Fed officials are more acutely focused on a so-called core inflation measure, which removes food and fuel prices to get a sense of underlying price trends. That measure ticked up on a monthly basis, but the yearly measure slowed to 5.7 percent in December from 6 percent previously.

Altogether, the data provided the latest evidence that inflation is moderating meaningfully, bringing consumers relief as they try to purchase a used vehicle, take a road trip or buy new furniture. But price increases are still unusually fast across a number of goods and services, from food to car maintenance, and the key question now is how quickly and completely inflation will return to prepandemic levels of around 2 percent after a year and a half of rapid increases.

President Biden greeted the report enthusiastically, emphasizing the role that his policies — including efforts to lower the cost of gas — have played in helping prices to climb more slowly. In remarks from the White House on Thursday, Mr. Biden said that moderating inflation “adds up to a real break for consumers, real breathing room for families and more proof that my economic plan is working.”

For the Fed, the report confirms that the slowdown in price gains that officials have long expected is finally coming to fruition. That could help policymakers, who have begun slowing the pace of interest rate increases, feel comfortable moving even more incrementally.

Fed officials adjusted their policy at the fastest pace in decades last year to try to wrangle rapid inflation, but with rates at a higher level and inflation showing early signs of slowing, they shifted to a half-point adjustment in December following a string of three-quarter point rate moves. Now, policymakers have made it clear that they are contemplating an even more modest quarter-point change in February.

The fresh inflation data probably bolsters the case for that gentler path, which will give officials more time to see how their policies are playing out in the economy and how much more is needed.

“I expect that we will raise rates a few more times this year, though, to my mind, the days of us raising them 75 basis points at a time have surely passed,” Patrick Harker, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, said in a speech on Thursday. “In my view, hikes of 25 basis points will be appropriate going forward.”

Yet the new report did little to suggest that the problem of rapid price increases has been entirely solved, which is why central bankers are still expected to push borrowing costs at least slightly higher and leave them elevated for some time to wrestle price increases under control.

“This report really supports a downshift,” said Blerina Uruci, chief U.S. economist in the fixed income division at T. Rowe Price. “But I don’t think this changes the overall inflation picture: We’re making progress on decelerating inflation, but from a very high level.”

Several trends should help to slow price increases this year. More muted cost changes for goods are expected to help cool overall inflation as supply chains heal. Used cars and trucks, a big driver of inflation in 2021 and early 2022, became cheaper last month, for instance. New cars also declined slightly in price.

Housing costs should also moderate later this year. Climbing rents bolstered inflation in December and could continue to push inflation higher for a while, but that is expected to reverse with time. Rents for newly leased apartments have begun to climb much more slowly, private data suggests, which will gradually feed into the government’s official inflation measure.

But there are still lingering risks. Most notably, economic officials are closely watching what is happening with prices for other services, which include things like hotel rooms, sporting event tickets and health care. They worry that services inflation — which is unusually rapid — could keep prices increasing faster than the central bank’s target. The Fed aims for 2 percent inflation on average, using a price measure that is different from but related to the Consumer Price Index.

Core services prices excluding housing costs, a measure that both the Fed and economists are watching closely, picked up 0.3 percent in December on a monthly basis. That was up from 0.1 percent in November, according to calculations by Omair Sharif, founder of Inflation Insights.

“What we’ve done is made a pivot from goods inflation,” Mr. Harker said in a question-and-answer session following his speech. “Service inflation ex-shelter is still running really high.”

Many central bankers think that to get services inflation under control, they need to slow down the job market and tamp down wage gains. Otherwise, companies facing larger labor bills are likely to continue passing those costs along to consumers.

“The biggest cost, by far, in that sector is labor,” Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, said at his latest news conference in December. “And we do see a very, very strong labor market, one where we haven’t seen much softening, where job growth is very high, where wages are very high.”

That is why central bankers have remained resolute, if more measured, when it comes to raising interest rates. Higher borrowing costs can discourage consumers from making big purchases, like cars and houses, while slowing business expansions and eventually tamping down hiring and pay gains.

Investors do expect the Fed to raise rates slightly more, but not by as much as officials are predicting. Markets are betting that policymakers will announce a quarter-point move at their Feb. 1 meeting, taking the main policy rate to 4.5 to 4.75 percent, but investors expect rates to remain below the 5.1 percent peak that Fed officials have predicted.

“There is profound skepticism now,” said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Economics, who thinks that the central bank has done enough at this point to put inflation on a path back to normal. “I’m not sure that there are many people in markets who believe that they are going to go hike, after hike, after hike.”

A major question is whether inflation will be able to slow without sending the economy into a painful downturn. As price increases moderate, many on Wall Street and some within the central bank have expressed hope that a soft landing, in which inflation moderates without serious economic pain, might be possible.

“I remain what I call a realistic optimist,” Susan Collins, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, said in an interview on Wednesday. “There is resilience that I continue to see in the economy, and that makes me optimistic that there is a path to reducing inflation without a significant downturn.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Egg prices, shortages surge in Tacoma
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article271113417.html
GIST	<p>If you’re struggling to find a decently-priced carton of eggs at your local supermarket, you’re not alone. In fact, a viral outbreak is to blame for surging egg prices.</p> <p>Egg prices continue to break records at retail stores amid ongoing supply chain shortages. The USDA released a report Monday which shows that the average price for a dozen large grade A white eggs across all U.S. regions is now at around \$5.25. That is more than three times higher than the same period in 2022, where the average price of grade A white eggs was at \$1.57.</p> <p>In addition, the average price for a dozen organic brown eggs hovered around \$3.66 for the month of December in the Pacific Northwest region.</p> <p>In the Tacoma area, the eggs most affected by the supply issue are brown and grade A eggs, as well as cartons of extra large and jumbo sizes. Inside one of city’s Fred Meyer locations, there were no organic</p>

brown grade A eggs of any size on shelves. As of the time of reporting, a spokesperson with Fred Meyer has not replied to The News Tribune's request for comment on the store's egg supply situation.

Another local Tacoma business, Metropolitan Market, also didn't have organic large brown eggs in stock.

The News Tribune reached out to Costco administration to discuss the company's egg prices and supply situation, they declined to comment.

Of the eggs in stock, cartons of white cageless remained plentiful at several Tacoma locations.

Prices for a dozen were as low as \$2.49 at some stores. In general, customers should expect prices to be anywhere from around \$4.49 or higher for a dozen of large brown grade AA eggs. If you're lucky to find a carton of brown grade A eggs, don't be surprised if they end up costing more than \$7 for a dozen or more.

AVIAN INFLUENZA IMPACT ON PRICE OF EGGS

A major culprit of the current supply issue is the highly pathogenic avian influenza, according to Lyndsay Cole, assistant director of public affairs with USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, in an email to The News Tribune. An outbreak in a commercial flock was first detected in early February 2022.

Then the disease struck down high numbers of chickens at a commercial operation in Franklin County in December, according to the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

Altogether, the outbreak has affected more than 57 million birds since the virus was first detected in wild aquatic birds in January 2022, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In commercial flocks, the virus has killed over 44 million laying hens, and five outbreaks have occurred in Pierce County. This has led to a perfect storm in the current egg market, Cole said.

"To date, depopulations at commercial layer facilities have reduced domestic supplies of eggs by roughly 7.5% per month, on average," Cole said via email. "Meanwhile, consumer prices for shell eggs have been on the rise as compared to December 2021."

A USDA report released Friday shows that consumer demand for shell eggs is much higher this month compared to that of January 2022. In addition, while egg production increased through 2021, production gradually decreased from beginning to end of 2022.

Avian flu isn't the only factor driving up egg prices. The USDA report states that a competitive animal protein market is also driving up demand among retail customers.

"As the new year gets underway, more than a few consumers are looking to modify their dietary choices to support freshly-minted healthier lifestyle resolutions and eggs remain a popular go-to option," the report states. "Recent record high egg prices have begun to soften but it will take some time before this is reflected at the dairy case."

Avian influenza spreads through a bird's saliva, nasal secretions and fecal matter, according to the CDC. It is uncommon for the disease to spread to humans, though some cases have been previously reported.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Western tanks appear headed to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/europe/ukraine-western-tanks.html
GIST	<p>Western officials, who increasingly fear that Ukraine has only a narrow window to prepare to repel an anticipated Russian springtime offensive, are moving fast to give the Ukrainians sophisticated weapons they had earlier refused to send for fear of provoking Moscow.</p> <p>Over the past few weeks, one barrier after another has fallen, starting with an agreement by the United States in late December to send a Patriot air defense system. That was followed by a German commitment</p>

last week to provide a Patriot missile battery, and in the span of hours, France, Germany and the United States each promised to send armored fighting vehicles to Ukraine's battlefields for the first time.

Now it looks likely that modern Western tanks will be added to the growing list of powerful weapons being sent Ukraine's way, as the United States and its allies take on more risk to defend Ukraine — especially as its military has made unexpected advances and held out against withering assaults.

While Ukraine has been requesting sophisticated tanks since the start of the war, the push to satisfy those pleas gained speed this week as the British and Polish governments publicly urged a change in the Western alliance's stance. The British signaled that they were close to agreeing to send a small number of tanks, and the Polish government said it would happily send some of its German-made tanks, although Berlin would need to allow it.

Ukraine hopes that the increased pressure will persuade Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz to authorize the export to Ukraine of German-made tanks in the arsenals of other NATO allies. The tanks, called the Leopard 2s, are among the most coveted by Kyiv, and experts say that in significant numbers, they would substantially increase Ukraine's ability to drive back Russian forces.

"Somebody always has to set an example," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told Polish state-run broadcaster TVP Info on Thursday.

A German defense ministry spokesperson said no decision had been made by the government of Scholz, a Social Democrat. But his coalition partners, the Greens and Free Democrats, support sending the tanks, and on Thursday, a senior minister amped up the pressure.

"There is a difference between making a decision for yourself and preventing others from making a decision," Germany's economics minister and vice chancellor, Robert Habeck of the Greens, said in Berlin.

Tanks, designed more than a century ago to break through trench warfare, are a combination of firepower, mobility and shock effect. Armed with large cannons, moving on metal treads and built with stronger protective armor than any other weapon on a battlefield, tanks can go over rough, muddy or sandy terrain where wheeled fighting vehicles might struggle.

In Ukraine, officials say armored vehicles will play a key role in battles for control of the fiercely contested towns and cities in the eastern provinces that border Russia. Ukraine's most senior military commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, has said Ukraine needs some 300 Western tanks and about 600 Western armored fighting vehicles to make a difference.

The sense of urgency over sending more powerful weapons partly reflects the grim standoff on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine, where for months the Russians have tried to seize the city of Bakhmut and the surrounding area, suffering heavy casualties but gaining little ground. In the past week, the fighting has been especially brutal in the nearby town of Soledar, going block to block and house to house, with conflicting claims about control of the town.

NATO allies that were once part of the Soviet sphere have given their Soviet-era tanks to Ukraine. But much of Kyiv's fleet has been destroyed or worn down by months of battle, and it is running low on ammunition, which is incompatible with Western munitions.

Since the war began nearly a year ago, the West has resisted giving some of its most potent weapons to Ukraine, fearing that would bring NATO into direct conflict with Russia. But seeing Ukraine's determination to resist, little prospect of peace talks anytime soon, and a stalemate on the battlefield, NATO allies are relenting.

The Patriots they recently agreed to are the most advanced American-made air defense system and will help protect Kyiv and other densely populated areas from Russian strikes that have crippled Ukraine's

electricity grid. The armored fighting vehicles approved last week are lighter and easier to maneuver on the battlefield than tanks and can carry more troops, but are not as powerful.

There are still some weapons not being considered, including fighter jets and longer-range missiles that could hit occupied Crimea and Russia itself. The Biden administration, leading the coalition of allies supplying Ukraine with weapons, is holding back American-made M1 Abrams tanks, which require constant upkeep and special fuel, and which officials say are too scarce to spare.

But U.S. officials maintain they have never stood in the way of Germany or any other nation sending Western tanks to Ukraine. There are an estimated 2,000 German-made Leopard tanks in more than a dozen militaries across Europe. Some could be shipped quickly to Ukraine if Berlin approved, although Ukrainian crews would have to be trained to use them.

A senior Western military official said this week that altering the balance of forces in eastern Ukraine is needed to break the stalemate in the war, and that sending in enough modern Western battle tanks and other combat vehicles could help to tip that balance. Without tanks, a powerful component of ground warfare, it is unlikely that Ukraine will be able to win back significant amounts of territory, the official said.

At the Pentagon, Laura K. Cooper, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, said last week at a briefing that “we absolutely agree that Ukraine does need tanks.”

“This is the right time for Ukraine to take advantage of its capabilities, to change the dynamic on the battlefield,” Cooper said.

Ukraine is set on pushing forward with its own military offensive, either in the depth of winter or after the muddy spring season. Russia, too, is telegraphing a spring offensive, said a senior Western intelligence official, and Ukraine “doesn’t want them to catch their breath” between now and when that intensified round of combat begins.

Camille Grand, a defense expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations, who stepped down as NATO’s assistant secretary-general for defense investment late last year, noted that Moscow appears to be mobilizing hundreds of thousands of new conscripts for its offensive. That, in part, pushed forward the debate about tanks, he said, “to enable the Ukrainian forces to achieve significant progress now.”

Part of the discussion, Grand said, focused on whether the tanks would give Ukrainian forces “some sort of a decisive victory that would force peace on the Russians, or at least to achieve such significant progress that any negotiated settlement would be more on their terms than on Russian terms.”

The issue of whether to allow Leopards to be sent to Ukraine is likely to come to a head at a Jan. 20 meeting of senior defense and military officials from dozens of nations, including NATO states, at Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Norbert Röttgen, an opposition German legislator and foreign-policy expert, predicted that Scholz would give in on the Leopards under pressure from allies, as he did earlier with German-made howitzers and tracked armored infantry fighting vehicles.

Scholz and his party “want to keep a relationship with Russia and with Putin for the future,” and Scholz “thinks that if he gives Ukraine the best Germany has, Russia will perceive this as breaking a special relationship,” Röttgen said. “But pressure from allies is becoming too strong.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Seattle traffic congestion still remains down
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/seattle-traffic-hasnt-made-a-u-turn-to-pre-pandemic-levels/

GIST	<p>Very few good things came out of the pandemic, but here's one: Traffic congestion is way down, at least in Seattle.</p> <p>While some cities have recovered and even surpassed their 2019 traffic-congestion levels, Seattle in 2022 remained far from its peak, according to a new report from Kirkland-based INRIX, a traffic data and car technology company.</p> <p>Traffic congestion last year was down 38% in Seattle from 2019, which is the third-biggest drop among the 25 most congested U.S. urban areas. Sacramento had the biggest decline, at 44%, followed by Providence, Rhode Island, at 40%.</p> <p>INRIX analyzed traffic congestion in 295 U.S. urban areas. Many places, including Seattle, saw their lowest levels of traffic congestion in 2021, at the height of the pandemic. As things started to return to normal in 2022, traffic congestion increased across the board. But most cities did not bounce back to their 2019 levels.</p> <p>Among the 25 most congested areas, only four exceeded their pre-pandemic traffic congestion in 2022: Las Vegas (up a remarkable 156%), Miami, Nashville and Chicago. San Francisco's levels were equal to 2019.</p> <p>The report notes smaller urban areas have largely returned to pre-pandemic congestion levels while most of the largest and most congested places have lagged behind.</p> <p>Whatever the reason, Seattle is, for now, not among the worst urban areas for traffic congestion. Remember when Seattle was inside the Top 10? At our worst — in 2017 and 2018 — INRIX ranked us sixth in the U.S. for time lost sitting in traffic.</p> <p>Since the start of the pandemic, Seattle has dropped down in the rankings for worst congestion in the U.S. In 2022, we ranked 19th among U.S. urban areas, sandwiched between Austin and Concord, California. Globally, we ranked 93rd, between Bari, Italy, and Lugano, Switzerland.</p> <p>Here's one data point to illustrate the change: In 2018, Seattle drivers lost 138 hours to traffic congestion, on average, according to INRIX. That number was just 48 hours last year.</p> <p>Chicago had the nation's worst traffic in 2022, with the average driver losing 155 hours to traffic congestion. Worldwide, Chicago ranked just slightly behind London, which had the worst traffic in the world, with drivers losing 156 hours to congestion.</p> <p>The report also includes an estimate of what congestion costs the typical driver in each city. It turns out these costs may be one of the very few bargains we get as Seattle-area residents.</p> <p>INRIX pegged the average cost of congestion here at \$779 in 2022 — and while that's not insignificant, it ranked fifth lowest among the 25 most congested areas. In No. 1 Chicago, the typical driver lost \$2,618 in congestion-related costs. Note that those dollar amounts don't include fuel cost increases, which cost the average American driver \$134 more in 2022 than in 2021, according to INRIX.</p> <p>But we still have one stretch of road that ranks among the worst in the nation. In Tacoma, southbound Highway 167 from 15th St. S.W. to Valley Avenue East, ranked as the 17th-worst corridor in the country. Drivers lost an average 14.5 minutes per day on this road during their late-afternoon commutes.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Metal detectors in elementary schools?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/shooting-fallout-metal-detectors-in-elementary-schools/
GIST	NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — The shooting of a first-grade teacher by a 6-year-old boy has plunged the nation into uncharted waters of school violence, with many in the Virginia shipbuilding city where it happened demanding metal detectors in every school.

On Thursday, the Newport News School Board announced that 90 walk-through metal detectors would be placed in schools across the district, starting with Richneck Elementary School, where teacher Abigail Zwerner was shot Friday.

“The time is now to put metal detectors in all of our schools,” board Chairman Lisa Surles-Law told a news conference.

The move came even as educators and other experts nationwide grappled with the complex issue of how to prevent gun violence in even the youngest school populations.

“This is a real game changer,” said Mo Canady, executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers, which trains law enforcement members who work in schools.

“How do we begin to approach the idea of protecting students and staff from an armed 6-year-old?”

American educators have long been trying to create safe spaces that feel less like prisons and more like schools. If anything, Friday’s shooting fuels a debate over the effectiveness of metal detectors — which are still relatively rare in schools — and other safety measures.

“Metal detectors and clear backpacks are more likely to cause young children to be fearful and feel criminalized,” said Amanda Nickerson, a school psychology professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

“Many of the strategies being suggested do not have any research evidence, and they may actually erode a healthy school climate,” she said — one where students and staff feel free to share concerns about possible threats, which has been shown to prevent shootings.

A more effective approach fosters “positive social, emotional, behavioral and academic success,” Nickerson said.

Ron Avi Astor, a professor of social welfare and education at the University of California, Los Angeles, said “it’s really the gun owners who need to be held responsible.”

Police in Newport News say the 6-year-old brought his mother’s gun, which had been purchased legally, to school, though it’s unclear how he gained access to it. A Virginia law prohibits leaving a loaded gun where it is accessible to a child under 14, a misdemeanor crime punishable with a maximum one-year prison sentence and \$2,500 fine. No charges have been brought against the mother so far.

Astor said that a public health approach to reducing gun violence in schools is needed, as well as gun licensing.

“Let’s all agree that gun education is really important, particularly around gun safety and accidents and kids getting access to guns,” Astor said. “Let’s make that part of health class. Let’s make sure every kid, parent and educator goes through education and hazardous materials safety training in every school in the United States.”

“Gun safety education ... is something that most Americans agree on, based on national polls. That’s a great place to start saving lives and reducing injury or death,” Astor said.

The shooting Friday occurred as Zwerner taught her first-grade class at Richneck Elementary. There was no warning and no struggle before the 6-year-old pointed the gun at Zwerner and fired one round.

The bullet pierced Zwerner’s hand and struck her chest. The 25-year-old hustled her students out of the classroom before being rushed to the hospital. She has improved and was listed in stable condition Monday, authorities said.

Police Chief Steve Drew described the shooting as “intentional.” A judge will determine what’s next for the child, who is being held at a medical facility following an emergency custody order.

Eric Billet, whose three children attend Newport News public schools, said he supports more security measures, like metal detectors, bag searches and a security officer at every school. But he would also like more behavioral specialists and counselors working with students.

Two of Billet’s children go to Richneck, including his fourth-grade daughter who’s endured nightmares following the shooting.

“The more challenging piece is the culture change,” he said.

“I know some teachers have had trouble controlling classrooms since COVID,” Billet added. “I do not know all of the reasons, whether it’s parenting at home or other influences, or a lack of authority and discipline at school. I definitely do not blame the teachers for this.”

Rick Fogle, whose grandson is in second grade at Richneck, supports increased use of metal detectors. But he also said schools need to be more willing to search backpacks, pockets and desks if kids are suspected of having a gun.

“They’ve got to overcome social pressure to respect people’s rights and realize that the rights of those who could be injured need to be considered,” Fogle said.

Researcher David Riedman, founder of a database that tracks U.S. school shootings dating back to 1970, said he’s only aware of three other shootings involving 6-year-olds in that time period — and only one other case of a student younger than that.

At the same time, people are shot or guns are taken away at schools almost every day, Riedman said. There were 302 shootings on school property last year. And since 1970, more than 250 teachers, principals and other school staff have been shot.

Still, he questioned how realistic it is for schools to ramp up use of metal detectors.

“Schools are already struggling with adequate resources — finding bus drivers, finding enough teachers,” Riedman said. “To have comprehensive school security with 100% weapons detection essentially requires a TSA-style agency that would cost hundreds of billions of dollars to implement across the country. And that’s not viable.”

The use of metal detectors in schools, particularly elementary schools, is still rare, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

During the 2019-2020 school year, less than 2% of public elementary schools performed random metal detector checks on students. It was 10% for middle schools and 14.8% for high schools.

About 2% of elementary schools required backpacks to be clear while just over 9% of middle schools and 7% of high schools imposed that requirement, the center said. About 54.6% of elementary schools had security staff present at least once a week; at middle schools it was 81.5% and at high schools 84.4%.

Canady said equipping schools with metal detectors requires a lot of training and maintenance — and can provide a false sense of security if they’re not operated correctly.

A relationship-based policing approach can better help avert school violence, he said. “Every student in a school environment should have at least one trusted adult that they can connect with,” Canady said.

	<p>Krista Arnold, executive director of the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, agreed. She worked as an elementary school principal for 18 years in Virginia Beach before retiring in 2021.</p> <p>“I had a couple of knives brought to school during my 18 years, and (the students) usually sing like canaries and tell somebody,” Arnold said. “And that usually got to the front office pretty quickly.”</p> <p>Arnold said she’s not a proponent of turning schools into fortresses. Instead, she supports teaching empathy and other behavioral skills.</p> <p>“My experience is when you build that community and you explicitly teach social, emotional skills — and you talk about how it makes the other person feel if you’ve hurt them ... you build that good citizenship and you reduce the amount of discipline and aggression in the school,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Long Covid symptoms linger year or more?
SOURCE	https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2023-01-12/even-after-mild-cases-of-covid-long-covid-symptoms-can-linger-for-more-than-a-year
GIST	<p>For some COVID-19 patients, the initial illness isn’t nearly as bad as the persistent and sometimes disabling symptoms that linger for months or years afterward. These are the people with long COVID, a complex chronic illness that can afflict without regard for age, sex, vaccination status or medical history.</p> <p>A study of nearly 2 million patients in Israel offers new insights into the trajectory of long COVID, particularly for younger, healthier people whose COVID-19 cases were mild. Researchers found that although most protracted symptoms subsided within a year, some of the syndrome’s most debilitating consequences — namely dizziness, loss of taste and smell, and problems with concentration and memory — still plague a minority of sufferers a full year after the initial infection.</p> <p>For the study, published Wednesday in the medical journal BMJ, researchers examined the health records of more than 1.9 million members of Maccabi Healthcare Services, one of Israel’s largest health maintenance organizations. Among them were just under 300,000 people who tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus between March 1, 2020, and Oct. 1, 2021, and who were not hospitalized in the first month after infection, a sign that their cases were mild.</p> <p>The researchers matched each coronavirus-positive subject with an uninfected person in the sample who had the same age, sex and vaccination status and a similar history of risk factors like diabetes, cancer and obesity, among other preexisting conditions. Then the investigators tracked the medical records of both members of each pair to see the health issues they experienced over the following 12 months.</p> <p>“When we started this study, there was a lot of uncertainty regarding the long-term effects of the pandemic,” said computational scientist Maytal Bivas-Benita, who conducted the study with colleagues at Israel’s KI Research Institute.</p> <p>Most COVID-related symptoms declined sharply in the first months after infection, including breathing difficulties, chest pain, cough, joint pain and hair loss, a side effect that often accompanies acute physical stress.</p> <p>The older a patient was at the time of infection, the more likely they were to report long COVID issues. And many long COVID sufferers still grappled with their symptoms a year after becoming sick.</p> <p>For instance, six months after a mild bout of COVID-19, unvaccinated people were 5½ times more likely to report problems with smell and taste than their uninfected peers. Even at the 12-month mark, the former COVID-19 patients were more than twice as likely to have trouble with these senses.</p> <p>Likewise, former COVID-19 patients continued to have elevated risks of shortness of breath, weakness and problems with memory and concentration a year after they first became infected.</p>

Other long COVID symptoms tended to resolve themselves more quickly, the study authors found. Within four months, those who were once infected were no more likely to struggle with coughing than those who remained infection-free. Complaints of heart palpitations and chest pain were equally likely in both groups after eight months, and the same was true for hair loss after seven months.

The authors concluded that mild COVID-19 cases do not lead to serious or chronic long-term illness for the vast majority of patients and that they add “a small continuous burden” to the healthcare system overall.

Advocates for long COVID patients say that big-picture view glosses over the ongoing struggles of patients who are disabled by their lingering symptoms.

“Things like cardiac arrhythmias, problems with memory, concentration — all these types of symptoms not only are problematic medically, but also impede a person’s ability to work and live their daily life,” said [Melissa Pinto](#), an associate professor of nursing at UC Irvine who studies long COVID. “Not all symptoms are equally problematic.”

The Israeli researchers noted that many long COVID symptoms worsened during the first six months of the illness before beginning any kind of decline, an observation that tracks with the experience of many long-haul patients.

“There are some concerning findings, including that some major neurological and cognitive symptoms do not decrease over time,” such as memory and concentration loss, said Hannah Davis, a co-founder of the [Patient-Led Research Collaborative](#), a research group that focuses on the condition.

She added that the new study is in line with previous work showing that neurological symptoms worsen over the first four months of illness. “This kind of finding is vital to communicate to the public for two reasons: first, to let new long COVID patients understand what to expect, and second, to give future researchers a clue into the possible mechanism.”

The researchers relied on diagnostic codes to see which symptoms affected patients. That approach excluded more recently defined ailments like [postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome](#), or POTS, which received a code in the U.S. only in October 2022.

POTS is a disorder of the autonomic nervous system that affects blood circulation. It can be triggered by infections, and somewhere between [2% to 14% of COVID-19 survivors](#) have subsequently been diagnosed with POTS. The condition’s symptoms include many of the persistent ones reported in the Israeli study: heart palpitations, dizziness, weakness and problems with concentration.

“It’s great that they are trying to collect this kind of data. But there are inherent flaws in electronic health records-based research that would cause me to question [whether] the results actually capture the lived experiences of these patients,” said [Lauren Stiles](#), an executive committee member of the [Long COVID Alliance](#) and president of [Dysautonomia International](#), an advocacy group for patients with autonomic nervous system disorders.

“What we’re seeing in the long COVID patient community is that a good subset of people are seeing some improvement over the first year,” Stiles said. “But there is a substantial number of patients who have a very long-lasting chronic illness, who are now going on three years of unrelenting illness.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Kindergarten measles vaccination declines
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/slide-in-measles-vaccination-rate-among-kindergartners-raises-alarm/

GIST

More than 250,000 children who entered kindergarten in fall 2021 may be at risk for measles, one of the most infectious pathogens on the planet, because they did not receive the vaccinations required to enroll in school, according to federal health data released Thursday.

Only about 93 percent of American kindergartners were vaccinated against the potentially fatal disease with the required two doses — the second year in a row that measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) coverage fell below the 95 percent level needed to prevent the virus from spreading in the community. The last time U.S. kindergartners had that protection was during the 2019-2020 school year, before the start of the pandemic.

The report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also shows continued decline in immunization rates for three other childhood vaccines that prevent diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTaP), polio and chickenpox among kindergartners in 2021.

The latest data underscores concerns that growing parental resistance to routine childhood immunizations is fueling a resurgence in vaccine-preventable diseases, such as the recent measles outbreaks in Minnesota and Columbus, Ohio, that sickened more than 100 children last year. The pandemic has magnified the issue because of the politicization around coronavirus vaccines, and the lingering consequences of school closures and fewer children going to the doctor on immunization rates.

“We know measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination coverage for kindergartners is the lowest it has been in over a decade ... and that is something to be concerned about,” Georgina Peacock, the CDC’s director of immunization services, said in a briefing.

While a two percentage point drop in measles vaccination rates may seem insignificant, health officials and experts warn that even the smallest decline allows the virus to spread more quickly, causing outbreaks in clusters of unvaccinated children. Measles is so contagious that people who may not know they are being exposed can become infected and spread the virus to family members or other contacts before they show symptoms.

In addition to being potentially lethal, the measles virus weakens the immune system and makes a child more vulnerable to other diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhea — an effect that lasts for months after the body clears the measles infection.

The federal data shows nine states and the District of Columbia with vaccination coverage among kindergartners below 90 percent, including Ohio and Minnesota. That’s the largest number of states to fall below that level in CDC published data, which goes back to 2009-2010. New York, Nebraska, North Carolina and Tennessee are among the 12 states with MMR vaccination rates above 95 percent.

Kindergartners’ coverage for all four childhood vaccines — to prevent measles; diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTaP); polio and chickenpox — was about 93 percent nationwide in the 2021-2022 school year, down from 94 percent in 2020-2021, and 95 percent in 2019-2020.

The decline means that more than 275,000 kindergartners may not be completely protected against these diseases, according to the CDC.

All states and the District of Columbia require children to be vaccinated against certain diseases, such as measles, polio and whooping cough, to attend public school. All grant exemptions based on medical reasons; a growing number also allow religious or philosophical exemptions.

Several factors are behind the decline. Pandemic-related disruptions to the health care system delayed pediatric checkups. In part as a result, providers have ordered fewer doses from the federal program that provides vaccines for half of all American children. In some cases, schools also lack the staff to ensure parents submit health documentation in time.

And concerns over the value of the coronavirus vaccine are increasingly spilling over into routine immunizations.

“COVID vaccination, in some cases, is impacting whether or not people choose to get other routine vaccinations,” said the CDC’s Peacock. “When we think about vaccine confidence and the motivation to get a vaccine, that depends on a lot of things. The easier it is to be able to take your child to get a vaccine, the more likely you are to do it.”

Preventable diseases spread quickly, she said, pointing to the recent measles outbreaks in Ohio and Minnesota.

CDC recommends children get two doses of MMR vaccine, with the first dose at 12 to 15 months, and the second dose between 4 and 6 years old. One dose of the vaccine is about 93 percent effective in preventing measles; two doses are about 97 percent effective.

In the Columbus outbreak, most of the 83 children infected were old enough to get the shots, but their parents had chosen not to do so, officials have said, resulting in the country’s largest outbreak of the highly infectious pathogen in 2022. If no new cases are reported by Jan. 30, authorities will likely declare that outbreak over, said Myles Bell, a Columbus health department spokesman.

Minnesota reported 22 cases of measles between June and November last year, but they occurred in several clusters. That pattern was more concerning than one large outbreak, such as the one the state experienced in 2017.

The clusters “remained contained like small campfires, but each had the potential to drastically expand to a forest fire that could have had more severe consequences,” said Doug Schultz, a spokesman for the Minnesota health department. Vaccine hesitancy was a contributing factor in both outbreaks, health officials have said.

Peacock also pointed to the case of paralytic polio in a New York man this summer that prompted worry that low childhood immunization rates and rising vaccine misinformation could result in the disease’s resurgence, decades after vaccination had eliminated it in the United States.

“I think those are all evidence of the fact that we do have pockets in the United States where we have low vaccine coverage among children ... and also in these particular communities on increasing vaccination rates,” Peacock said.

The CDC this week launched an initiative to get routine immunizations for adults and children back on schedule. Officials are giving health care providers more information and strategies to help them talk about vaccines and work more intensely with community groups in areas where vaccination rates are very low.

Rupali Limaye, an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University who has studied vaccine hesitancy, said the overall decline in childhood immunization rates is worrying, and the drop in measles vaccination in particular, is dangerously low and “quite concerning.”

She has spoken to hundreds of parent, church and other community groups in the last three years about the coronavirus vaccine. Many people may not have had issues with the routine immunization schedule before the pandemic, she said. But confusing messaging about the need for children to get the coronavirus vaccine “has affected their decision-making to these routine immunizations,” Limaye said.

Immunization advocates say it’s hard to raise vaccination rates without a clearer understanding of why they fell.

“Most recent surveys show parents still overwhelmingly support childhood vaccines, so is it an awareness issue?” asked Erica DeWald, director of strategic communications at Vaccinate Your Family, an

	immunization advocacy group. "Or do we need to identify access issues that arose as a result of the pandemic? We need to continue collaborating with community partners to identify and address the underlying barriers to vaccination."
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HEADLINE	01/12 Diaz sworn in as Seattle PD chief
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/adrian-diaz-sworn-in-chief-of-police-seattle/281-c0b65b8e-a59c-4ecc-940d-6254783840dd
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Adrian Diaz was sworn in as chief of the Seattle Police Department Thursday after serving as interim chief since 2020.</p> <p>The Seattle City Council confirmed Diaz with an 8-1 vote last week, with Councilmember Kshama Sawant being the single "no" vote.</p> <p>He was previously selected by Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell to serve as police chief.</p> <p>Diaz began serving as interim chief after former Police Chief Carmen Best stepped down in August 2020. Best's resignation came after a tumultuous summer of racial justice protests, culminating in the Seattle City Council voting to cut police department spending.</p> <p>Diaz has worked for the Seattle Police Department for more than two decades. He worked in patrol, the mountain bike unit and the anti-crime team before joining the investigations bureau. He also served as assistant chief of the Collaborative Policing Bureau before he was promoted to deputy chief.</p> <p>Diaz will be charged with addressing ongoing staffing challenges in the department. The number of deployable officers is the lowest in over 30 years. Officers are still leaving more quickly than the department can hire them, data shows. The department has lost 400 officers over the past two-and-a-half years.</p> <p>After his confirmation, Diaz said that while the city has seen an increase in crime in the past few years and faced many challenges, including protests, the COVID-19 pandemic and resignations, he said officers continue to step up.</p> <p>"It's such an honor to serve in this capacity," Diaz said.</p> <p>The process to find the police department's next leader involved a national search and began in April. The city paid \$75,000 for a search firm and held community forums to find the right candidate. The mayor appointed a committee who evaluated candidates.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Russia claims control of Soledar
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-claims-control-soledar-eastern-ukraine-putin-success-rcna65240
GIST	<p>Russian forces on the frontline of the bitter fight for control of eastern Ukraine have claimed their first victory in several months of grinding conflict.</p> <p>After some of the war's most intense combat, Russia now controls the mining town of Soledar in the Donetsk region, Moscow's defense ministry said Friday. Ukrainian officials denied that the town had fallen.</p> <p>NBC News has not verified the claims of either side.</p> <p>The capture of Soledar would represent a morale-boosting breakthrough for the Kremlin after repeated setbacks on the battlefield and rare signs of disquiet at home as the war approaches the one-year mark.</p>

Russia may now be a step closer to [taking Bakhmut](#), a nearby city that has been devastated by shelling and remains an important national symbol of Ukrainian defiance.

The fighting in the area has been notable for the prominent role played by fighters from the Wagner group of mercenaries.

Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, an ally of President Vladimir Putin, has become a public face of Russia's war in recent months behind vocal criticism of the Kremlin's military leaders.

He had claimed victory in Soledar earlier this week and boasted on social media that his forces were in sole charge of the town. But Russia's defense ministry had stopped short of announcing the news and made no mention of Wagner fighters' role.

Moscow eventually said it had captured the town in a statement early Friday.

"On the evening of January 12, the liberation of the city of Soledar was completed, which is important for the continuation of successful offensive operations in the Donetsk direction," Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said according to state news agency Tass.

But Kyiv pushed back. The spokesman of the Eastern Group of the Ukrainian army, Serhiy Cherevaty, told NBC News that the claim was not true and that fighting was still ongoing in Soledar as of early Friday.

The head of the local Ukrainian administration, Pavlo Kyrylenko, said earlier this week that only 500 people were left in the town, most of them elderly.

Why it matters

The status of Soledar — known for its extensive underground tunnels and salt mines — has been unclear for days.

The town lies in the eastern Donetsk region, one of four that Putin claimed to have annexed last year despite failing to fully control. After the Russian retreat from Kherson in the south, the focus of the war moved east through the winter to waves of Russian attacks and artillery battles against Ukrainian positions.

The capture of Soledar would serve a military purpose while not constituting a turning point in the war, but would also fulfil a personal goal of bolstering Prigozhin's reputation, analysts said.

Although it has little intrinsic value, Soledar lies at a strategic point around 6 miles north of Bakhmut, which Russian forces are aiming to surround.

Taking Bakhmut could disrupt Ukrainian supply lines and open a route for Russian forces to press toward Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, key Ukrainian strongholds in Donetsk province.

"The salt mines are located in strategically important underground tunnels — there's a 200km (124 miles) tunnel network in that area, British intelligence has found, and they say those tunnels are a battleground: whoever takes them can infiltrate behind enemy lines quite effectively," Samuel Ramani, an expert in politics and international relations at the University of Oxford, told NBC News.

"The next step would be to advance on Bakhmut but they would have to encircle the city and they are still having problems with that."

The Institute for the Study of War, a U.S.-based think tank, said in its latest daily briefing that "Russian forces likely control most if not all of Soledar."

But this "is not an operationally significant development and is unlikely to presage an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut," the institute added.

And even if Russian forces did capture Bakhmut, many analysts are unsure that would prove a turning point.

"Capturing Soledar, or even Bakhmut, won't make up for the losses Russia has suffered, including the losses of Kherson for instance," said Michael Horowitz, head of intelligence at the Le Beck International security consultancy.

Speaking at a press briefing at the White House Thursday, National Security Coordinator John Kirby also played down the significance of any capture.

"Even if both Bakhmut and Soledar fall to the Russians ... it's not going to have a strategic impact on the war itself," he said.

"And it certainly isn't going to stop the Ukrainians or slow them down in terms of their efforts to regain their territory."

Kirby added that towns and villages across the region had changed hands throughout the course of the war.

The true value of Soledar's capture may be more symbolic.

"I think the value of cities like Bakhmut or Soledar are much more symbolic," Horowitz said.

"Russia has been sending wave after wave of soldiers to capture those cities for months, and they've become important for what they represent far more than for their actual military value. Bakhmut is the symbol of Ukrainian resistance, a symbol Zelenskyy visited a few weeks ago hours before flying to Washington. A symbol Russia would very much like to crush."

That the Soledar operation was apparently conducted at least in part by mercenaries, many of whom are serving criminal sentences, rather than regular Russian soldiers "tells you everything you need to know about the state of the Russian army," Horowitz said.

"The calculus is that those mercenaries are expendable. Their losses don't bear the same domestic cost as those of regular soldiers," he added.

As for Prigozhin, "he is definitely trying to take credit for this, he wants to elevate his own position internally," Ramani said.

As the war approaches its first anniversary on Feb. 24, attention is naturally turning to who holds the upper hand in the conflict.

Kyiv argues it cannot win without increased heavy artillery and tanks from its Western allies. Moscow says that its "special military operation" is going to plan, though news of the apparent breakthrough follows the replacement of the overall commander of its forces in Ukraine on Wednesday after just 3 months in charge.

"Ukraine is currently back on the defensive, which means that by essence, it is fighting a war on Russian terms. This is also why Kyiv needs additional offensive weapons, to seize back the initiative, which they did quite successfully multiple times over the course of the war," Horowitz said.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-envoy-russian-wagner-groups-activities-intolerable-96400183
GIST	<p>BELGRADE, Serbia -- A senior U.S. envoy expressed strong concern Thursday about the activities of the Russian private military contractor Wagner Group and its alleged attempts to recruit soldiers in Serbia and elsewhere in the world.</p> <p>U.S. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet said he voiced these concerns during talks in Belgrade with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.</p> <p>“We have seen that the Wagner Group is seeking to recruit soldiers from Serbia and elsewhere and that’s something we think cannot stand,” he told reporters after the meeting.</p> <p>“I don’t know if there are concerns (in Serbia), we talked about our concerns and we are looking forward to working with the government here in Belgrade and elsewhere where Wagner is active to put an end to their activities,” he added.</p> <p>Wagner Group, owned by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, reportedly has been active in dozens of mostly African states, working with governments on pro-Russian propaganda and other military and political projects.</p> <p>The group has boasted about its presence in Serbia, the only European state besides Belarus which has not joined international sanctions against Russia for its war against Ukraine. The group has reportedly announced the opening of its offices in Belgrade, something that was later denied.</p> <p>Moscow’s propaganda portal RT, which recently started its Serbian-language online news site in Serbia, has published Wagner’s recruitment advert seeking fighters in Ukraine, saying the group offers “more than attractive” incentives.</p> <p>Chollet said Wagner Group is “in action in terrible ways throughout the world, whether it is in Libya, the Central African Republic or right now in Ukraine.”</p> <p>The group which reportedly includes a large contingent of convicts recruited in Russian prisons has spearheaded the attacks in eastern Ukraine, including the fierce battles in Soledar and Bakhmut.</p> <p>Prigozhin and his group have been under U.S. sanctions for years and the U.S. has recently taken additional steps to try to control Wagner’s access to weapons.</p> <p>Wagner Group mercenaries have also been accused by Western countries and UN experts of numerous human rights abuses throughout Africa, including in the Central African Republic, Libya and Mali. Earlier this month. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced he has designated the Wagner Group as an “entity of particular concern” for its activities in the Central African Republic.</p> <p>Chollet also urged Serbia to introduce sanctions against its traditional Slavic ally Russia.</p> <p>“We believe that countries should sign on to the sanctions, and the reason why we believe that is because Russia’s actions do not only have to be condemned, they have to be punished,” he said. “Russia every day is prosecuting a brutal, unjustified war against Ukraine. We need to stand together, to ensure that this behavior, it’s clear that this behavior is unacceptable.”</p> <p>The U.S. envoy this week launched a tour of several Balkan nations in a visit focused on international efforts to help normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia after weeks of heightened tension. The former Serbian province declared independence in 2008, something Serbia and Russia don't recognize.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Malawi: worst cholera outbreak in decades
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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/worst-cholera-outbreak-decades-kills-750-people-malawi-96392532
GIST	<p>BLANTYRE, Malawi -- The worst cholera outbreak to affect Malawi in two decades has now claimed 750 lives, a government minister said, while the World Health Organization chief described the southeast African country as among the hardest-hit amid ongoing global epidemics that are “more widespread and deadly than normal.”</p> <p>Malawi’s Health Minister Khumbize Kandodo Chiponda on Thursday ordered the closure of many businesses that lack safe water, toilets and hygienic refuse disposal facilities, and announced restrictions on the sale of pre-cooked food.</p> <p>“We continue to record rising number of cases across the country, despite signs of reduced transmission and deaths in a few areas,” Chiponda said in a statement, and urged adherence to sanitation and hygiene measures.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Chiponda said 17 people had died from 589 new cases of the waterborne disease “in the past 24 hours.” She said the country has recorded 22,759 cases since the onset of the outbreak in March last year.</p> <p>Figures show that about 15 people have been dying daily in recent days, with 155 deaths recorded in the past 10 days. Nearly 1,000 people were hospitalized as of Wednesday.</p> <p>This week, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said 31 countries have reported cholera outbreaks since December, a 50% increase over previous years.</p> <p>“While we have had large cholera outbreaks before, we have not seen such a large number of simultaneous outbreaks,” Tedros said, adding that Malawi, along with Haiti and Syria, are among the worst-affected countries.</p> <p>Last year, the WHO and its partners switched to a single dose of the standard cholera vaccine instead of the usual two doses, due to supply problems.</p> <p>“Production is currently at maximum capacity, and despite this unprecedented decision, the stockpile remains very low,” Tedros said, adding that four more countries have asked for vaccines in the past few weeks.</p> <p>The WHO has previously blamed the unprecedented global surge in cholera on complex humanitarian crises in countries with fragile health systems that are being aggravated by climate change. Warmer temperatures and increased rains make it easier for the bacteria that cause cholera to multiply and spread.</p> <p>Africa CDC director Ahmed Omgwell Ouma told reporters during a weekly online briefing on Thursday that 14 African countries are reporting cholera cases, many of which are due to flooding across the continent. A significant proportion of the continent's 1.3 billion people lack access to safe water, sanitation and good hygiene.</p> <p>Ouma said 393 deaths from slightly more than 4,000 new cases were reported during the past week in Africa, where Malawi is the outbreak's epicenter.</p> <p>The country of about 20 million people recorded 71% of cases and 88% of deaths in the past week, said Ouma.</p> <p>In the capital, Lilongwe, some people blamed lack of basic services such as safe water and sanitation for the outbreak.</p>

“I was eating and drinking in the markets without washing my hands. I was not cautious, but also there is no water in these places” said 24-year-old Kondwani Malizani, a motor mechanic from the crowded Ngwenya Township in Lilongwe. He said he was hospitalized with cholera last week.

Lilongwe and Blantyre city, an economic hub in the south of the country, are most affected. Many public places such as busy markets have no tap water, while people are forced to dig wells at home or draw water from unsafe sources such as rivers and streams — factors that contribute to cholera outbreaks.

Epidemiologist Adamson Muula told the AP that the outbreak is affecting “the very poor” who lack access to safe water and sanitation.

“People who have functioning water closets, potable water from taps in homes and those who fortify themselves by not eating from questionable places are basically not at risk,” said Muula, a lecturer at Kamuzu University of Health Sciences in Blantyre. He blamed ruling elites for failing to invest in infrastructure.

“People who are not served by the municipal water supply system. People who defecate in bushes and other open spaces, drink from open water sources and those who live in communities where the different water companies can fail to provide tap water for days on end are the ones affected,” said Muula. “Such a disease becomes difficult to control as the bourgeois feel unconcerned.”

Health minister Chiponda on Thursday announced a ban on selling precooked foods along streets, in local markets, bus depots and school yards. She also ordered the closure of all marketing, transport and travel, sporting, religious and entertainment facilities that lack safe water, functional toilets and “organized and hygienic” refuse disposal facilities.

She also said the government plans to expand the water pipe network as well as to deliver water using trucks to people living in slums in Lilongwe and Blantyre. Schools in the two areas whose opening was delayed in early January are set to reopen on Jan. 17. This is after the government pledged to provide safe drinking water and reconnect piped water that had been discontinued at some schools in Lilongwe and Blantyre, Chiponda said.

The country this week pleaded for donations of cholera beds, tents, water buckets, rehydration salts, medical supplies and cash.

In November, the WHO and partners sent Malawi nearly 3 million cholera vaccines. Cholera is an acute diarrheal disease spread via contaminated water and food which can cause severe dehydration. It is a bacterial disease that affects both children and adults. If left untreated, up to 30% of cholera cases can be fatal and in extreme cases, the disease can kill within hours.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Calif. 'extreme drought' nearly eliminated
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/extreme-drought-eliminated-california-wake-atmospheric-river/story?id=96387910
GIST	<p>Extreme drought, the second-highest level of drought, has been nearly eliminated in the state of California in the wake of storms caused by atmospheric rivers slamming the state over the last several weeks.</p> <p>However, the extreme influx of moisture was contained to west of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, which does little to alleviate the dwindling water levels at Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the country.</p> <p>Extreme drought in California fell from 27.1% last week to 0.32% in the numbers released Thursday, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Severe drought, the third-highest level, fell from 71% to 46%. The week prior, parts of California and Nevada that were previously in exceptional drought status no longer qualified for the highest level of concern due to the extra moisture.</p>

Parts of California have received more than 3 feet of rain since Christmas, while the Sierra Nevada Mountains have had a record snowiest start to the season, already surpassing seasonal averages.

The data includes rain collected through Jan. 9 at 7 a.m. Eastern time, while doesn't include the last two days of heavy rain.

It will take several seasons at 120% to 200% the normal rain and snowfall to eliminate drought in the West, [according to experts](#). However, the Sierra Nevada region is already measuring between 87% and 192% of its normal precipitation for the season.

The rain is helpful, but snowpack is even more critical -- even preferable -- because it melts slowly and is better absorbed by the ground and also later contributes to the "water bank" for the spring and summer, Nate Stephenson, a scientist emeritus at the U.S. Geological Survey's Western Ecological Research Center, told ABC News.

California is currently at 226% of its normal snowpack for this time of year has surpassed the normal amount that is measured on April 1, when the snowpack is typically at its peak.

Soil moisture in California has also drastically improved -- measuring at 100% as of Tuesday, compared to 2% on Nov. 1. The moisture is likely staving off a [mass die-off of trees](#) in the state, experts told ABC News.

Some of the largest reservoirs in California are also beginning to recover, but they remain nowhere near their typical average for this time of year.

Shasta Lake, located in Shasta County in Northern California, is currently at 41% capacity versus an average of 67% for this time of year.

Lake Oroville and Folsom Lake are currently at 46% and 42% capacity, respectively, compared to average storage capacities of 85% and 100% for this time of year, data shows.

The inundation so far is not helping the Colorado River Basin as much, the region that needs the most help -- including Lake Mead and Lake Powell -- because they are in the heart of a 22-year mega drought.

Lake Mead is at 28% capacity after [hitting record lows](#) last summer.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Russia releases held US Navy veteran
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-navy-veteran-taylor-dudley-released-russian-custody/story?id=96391408
GIST	<p>A U.S. Navy veteran was released from Russian custody Thursday after being held since last April, according to statements from his family and former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's office.</p> <p>Navy veteran Taylor Dudley left Russia at the Bagrationovsk-Bezledy border crossing with Poland, and "is currently with the Richardson Center team," Richardson's statement said.</p> <p>Dudley's family thanked the Richardson Center for its work in freeing the American in a separate statement and added, "The past 9 months have been difficult ones for the family, and they ask the media to respect their privacy and give them the space to welcome Taylor home."</p> <p>Richardson and his team have been working over the past year to secure Dudley's release, traveling to Russia "multiple times" to meet with Russian counterparts, the statement said.</p>

	<p>"It is significant that despite the current environment between our two countries, the Russian authorities did the right thing by releasing Taylor today," Richardson said in the statement.</p> <p>"As we celebrate Taylor's safe return, we remain very concerned for Paul Whelan and committed to continue to work on his safe return, as we have been for the last four years, as well as other Americans," he added.</p> <p>Whelan, an ex-Marine, has been held in Russia since his arrest in 2019. Russia has accused him of being a spy, which the U.S. and his family outright deny.</p> <p>The Richardson Center "negotiates for the release of American prisoners and hostages held in hostile regimes or in countries with strained diplomatic relations ... on behalf of the families and at no cost to them," the statement said.</p> <p>Richardson, also the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has regularly been involved in negotiating the release of high-profile foreign prisoners, including several trips to Russia in 2022 to discuss the release of WNBA star Brittney Griner.</p> <p>A White House official said in a statement: "The Biden Administration is grateful for the work of Consular Affairs, Embassy Warsaw and Embassy Moscow that led to the resolution reached in this case. Out of consideration for the privacy of the family, we will not have further details to share at this time."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 China: don't travel or visit elderly relatives
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/12/chinese-warned-not-visit-elderly-relatives-covid-spreads-cities
GIST	<p>People in China have been warned against travelling to visit their elderly relatives during the lunar new year holiday, as Covid spreads rapidly through cities and into regional and poorer areas.</p> <p>Prof Guo Jianwen, a member of the state council's pandemic prevention team, urged people "don't go home to visit them" if elderly relatives had not yet been infected.</p> <p>"You have all kinds of ways to show you care for them, you don't necessarily have to bring the virus to their home," Guo said on Thursday.</p> <p>The holiday period, which begins on 21 January, was supposed to be a return to festivities and travel after the lifting of most restrictions in December, but instead it is coinciding with a wave of infections.</p> <p>Health authorities said this week the peak of infections had passed in several big provinces and cities including Beijing and Shanghai. But there are serious concerns for regional areas where health resources are more limited and older people are more likely to be unvaccinated.</p> <p>"The situation in rural China is very murky," said Dr Chen Xi, an assistant professor specialising in ageing and public health at Yale University. "We have strong reasons to believe rural China will get much worse as the spring festival approaches."</p> <p>The Guardian has heard reports from people in rural areas across China of mass infections, deaths, and healthcare woes, including areas where authorities say infections are yet to peak. One woman in Shandong said her parents had not been vaccinated because they did not trust Chinese vaccines, and now feared going outside as the virus spread through their village. Villagers in Guangdong province reported shortages of medication and oxygen supplies. In Shaanxi a musician who played at funerals reported being busier than ever, while a woman returning to her small Hunan village decried at least six new customary funeral sheds – temporary structures built for people to mourn an individual.</p>

One person in Henan said last week that their father was a rural doctor who was “busy from morning until night”, adding: “There are quite a lot of people with fever in the village, several households have them, but it is hard to get fever-reducing medicines.”

As well as urging people not to travel, regional authorities have been ordered to ensure the supply of pandemic materials, including at least two weeks’ worth of medication. The Global Times also said communities were advised to arrange village teams of drivers to transport patients “when ambulances from medical institutions cannot arrive in time”.

China’s outbreak has probably been worsened by the low vaccination rates among elderly people and the more limited health resources outside top-tier cities. Online community groups have crowdsourced over-the-counter medication for hard-hit villages. Protracted government negotiations with pharmaceutical companies have also made it difficult for people to get antiviral medications.

“It’s been a total mess,” a doctor in Anhui province told Agence France-Presse after a wave of infections hit in December. “Things were better when the government kept us all locked down.”

Dr James Wood, a professor of infectious disease dynamics and interventions at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, said the virus was spreading quickly and he expected no more than two to four weeks between peaks in major cities and “the most remote locations”.

“China is a vast country but it is still highly connected and once significant numbers of cases occurred in the major centres that would have quickly have seeded infections in all smaller cities and towns,” he said.

Health experts have criticised China’s management of the virus after abruptly ending its zero-Covid policy last month, saying it did not appear to have prepared for the expected increase in cases. Hospitals and crematoriums in big cities were quickly overwhelmed, with widespread reports of staff and medication shortages.

Officially, fewer than 40 people have died of Covid in the last month, but external analysis suggests the true figure is far higher, with predictions of as many as 1 million deaths by the end of the year.

The disconnection between the government’s claims and the reality on the ground has caused frustration and confusion. In response to Guo’s advice to stay home for the holidays, one popular response on social media said: “To be honest, it is one of the few useful suggestions put forward during this period.”

“Do you know how many elderly people around you have been taken away by the coronavirus?” said another. “Don’t you think it’s too late to say this now?”

The Chinese government stopped publishing most infection data since the sharp rise began, and holds an extremely limited definition of Covid-related deaths, counting it only if the patient died of respiratory failure.

The World Health Organization last week criticised the new definition as too narrow and underrepresenting the true impact of the outbreak. But Chinese authorities responded that it was not necessary to attribute every death.

“The key task during the pandemic should be treatment,” a senior government health official, Liang Wannian, said on Wednesday.

Despite global and domestic criticism, Beijing’s propaganda machine is pushing a narrative of success against the virus.

“Contrary to speculation by some western media and politicians who labelled the recent policy shift as ‘a U-turn’, the latest optimisation was a result of China’s scientific assessment of the current pandemic and

	based on prudent planning, as well as a timely response to the yearnings of the people," the official news outlet Xinhua said on Thursday.
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HEADLINE	01/12 China dismisses WHO health concerns
SOURCE	https://www.newsweek.com/china-elites-covid-pandemic-infections-deaths-data-1773025
GIST	<p>A Chinese health official dismissed concerns from the WHO and others about China's apparently suppressed COVID death toll, which continued to climb in single digits while the country's leading institutions published dozens of obituaries in recent weeks.</p> <p>"It is not necessary to look into the specific cause [of death] for each case at present. The priority during the pandemic should be treatment," said Liang Wannian, an epidemiologist who leads the COVID task force at China's National Health Commission.</p> <p>The outbreak in the country of 1.4 billion people is posing a "serious challenge to the entire medical and health care system," but the peak of the first wave has passed, Liang told a press briefing on Wednesday. The mortality rate will fluctuate as the virus spreads, with an accurate count only possible after the pandemic is over, he said.</p> <p>Beijing reversed its zero-COVID policy with little warning in early December, before proceeding to dismantle the rest of its years-long pandemic strategy in one month. Its discarding of regular testing has made infection dynamics difficult to assess, while new and stricter criteria for COVID deaths, to require proof of pneumonia or respiratory failure, has kept official fatalities at a minimum.</p> <p>Chinese health authorities have reported only 37 COVID-related deaths since last month, for a pandemic total of roughly 5,000. British health analytics company Airfinity, which maintains a statistical model of the world's largest outbreak, estimated China was seeing 20,400 daily deaths as of January 11, with a projected death toll of 1.7 million by the end of April.</p> <p>Unofficially, however, the virus has claimed the lives of dozens of mostly elderly public figures, including Communist Party cadres, ex-diplomats, leading academics and celebrities. Universities in Beijing and Shanghai were releasing frequent death notices about former professors, while at least two retired envoys died of COVID-related symptoms this month.</p> <p>The Harbin Institute of Technology, one of China's top public research universities, published 23 obituaries for retired professors between Christmas Day and Tuesday. Few of the deaths, if any, were reflected in the government's count.</p> <p>Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the WHO, said on Wednesday there was "almost certainly" an underreporting of virus deaths in China. Maria Van Kerkhove, the agency's technical lead on COVID, said communication with Beijing was ongoing to fill "very important information gaps" related to hospitalizations, deaths and genome sequencing.</p> <p>"WHO still believes that deaths are heavily underreported from China, and this is in relation to the definitions that are used, but also to the need for doctors and those reporting in the public health system to be encouraged to report these cases and not discouraged," said WHO emergencies director Mike Ryan.</p> <p>"There is also a shift in the definition away from 'COVID pneumonia' as the reporting disease to 'COVID infection' as the main basis for disease reporting, and we hope that that will encourage more reporting, and more reporting to WHO of the true situation on the ground in China," he said.</p> <p>Ryan previously said Beijing's criteria for counting COVID-related deaths, which also excludes those who die with preexisting illnesses, is "too narrow."</p>

Liang, the infectious diseases expert, argued there remains no consensus on a definition: "It would be best if a global consensus can be reached. If a consensus cannot be reached, each country will classify [COVID-related deaths] according to its own situation."

Wang Guiqiang, who heads the infectious diseases department at Peking University First Hospital, told the same briefing that China's final COVID death toll could consider excess mortality, which would compare fatalities to pre-pandemic years.

In an interview with Chinese state broadcaster CCTV that aired on Sunday, Liang acknowledged that many elderly patients were dying of the disease due to the scale and speed of the outbreak, for which China, like some countries in the West, wasn't adequately prepared.

Liang nonetheless defended China's decision to reopen in winter, when medical resources are typically stretched. The vaccination rate among the country's elderly was too low last summer, and waiting for this summer could risk waning immunity, he said.

Government data from late November showed an overall vaccination rate exceeding 90 percent, but the booster rate among those aged 80 and above was just 40 percent.

China's first nationwide COVID surge, which has peaked in some urban areas, could spread rapidly through its vast hinterland in the coming weeks during the Lunar New Year break. Some 2 million passengers are expected to travel by air, road and train in the 40-day holiday rush known as "chunyun" between January 7 and February 15, according to the Chinese transport ministry.

The WHO said transmissions would be difficult to track without real-time data. "It's not possible for WHO to give you a detailed breakdown on that because we simply do not have that data," said Ryan.

"We continue to ask for that data, but at the same time can recognize the efforts being made by colleagues in China to beef up their clinical support to people affected with the disease," he said.

In the meantime, the U.N. health agency has backed governments that have imposed testing requirements on travelers from China, policies Beijing argues are politically motivated. Negative PCR tests are still required for entry into China.

This week, Chinese embassies stopped issuing visas in Japan and South Korea in retaliation. "The measures we've taken are entirely justified and reasonable. We once again call on relevant countries to follow the principle of science and make sure that their COVID response measures are science-based and proportionate," Wang Wenbin, China's foreign ministry spokesperson, said in Beijing on Wednesday.

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HEADLINE	01/12 FAA still struggles to modernize, update
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/technology/faa-has-struggled-modernize-computer-air-traffic-operations-2023-01-12/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Jan 12 (Reuters) - The breakdown of a key computer system, which resulted in the suspension of U.S. flight departures on Wednesday, is not the first such issue to hinder Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) operations, and happened amid efforts to upgrade technology.</p> <p>The 90-minute halt, which was caused by a problem with an alerting system that sends safety messages for pilots and others, occurred less than two weeks after a different critical air-traffic control system caused flight delays at major airports in Florida. The latest glitch disrupted more than 11,000 flights on Wednesday.</p> <p>The FAA has struggled to modernize some long-standing parts of air traffic control. A 2021 Transportation Department Office of Inspection General (OIG) report repeatedly cited challenges in the FAA's multi-billion dollar Next Generation Air Transportation System (Next) infrastructure project.</p>

The OIG said its work "has shown that FAA has struggled to integrate key NextGen technologies and capabilities due to extended program delays that caused ripple effect delays with other programs."

In October, for example, the FAA said it was working to end a long-ridiculed, decades-old practice of air traffic controllers using paper flight strips to keep track of aircraft. But adopting the change at 49 major airports will [take the FAA until late 2029](#).

The FAA has also been trying to modernize [the Notices to Air Missions](#) (NOTAM) system "to improve the delivery of safety critical information to aviation stakeholders," according to its website. The system provides pilots, flight crews, and other users of U.S. airspace with relevant, timely and accurate safety notices.

Last April, the FAA began investing \$1 billion, out of \$5 billion set aside in the infrastructure package signed into law in 2022, in repairing and replacing key equipment in the air traffic control system, including power systems, navigation and weather equipment, and radar and surveillance systems across the country.

"There's a great deal of work needed to reduce the backlog of sustainment work, upgrades and replacement of buildings and equipment needed to operate our nation's airspace safely," FAA Deputy Administrator Bradley Mims said at the time.

In Florida, a system known as the En Route Automation Modernization (ERAM) used to control air traffic prompted the FAA on Jan. 2 to issue a ground stop order, slowing traffic into airports and snarling hundreds of flights.

The problem with the ERAM system at a major regional air traffic control center in Miami was behind dozens of flight delays at the Miami International Airport and flights into other airports in the southern U.S. state.

ERAM in 2015 replaced the 40-year-old En Route Host computer and backup system used at 20 FAA Air Route Traffic Control Centers nationwide.

House Transportation Committee chair Sam Graves, a Republican, labeled as "inexcusable" FAA's failure to properly maintain and operate the air traffic control system.

The FAA [said in 2020 it was more difficult](#) "for the FAA to hire technical talent as quickly and effectively than in the past".

The Department of Transportation, which oversees the FAA, has struggled with information technology. In 2019, a Government Accountability Office [report on federal government IT planning](#) found the DOT was one of three major agencies without a modernization plan.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Calif. no rest for weary: more flooding rain
SOURCE	https://www.accuweather.com/en/winter-weather/flooding-rain-to-aim-for-california-again/1466322
GIST	<p>AccuWeather meteorologists say that more rain is in the forecast for California, as additional storms from the Pacific are expected to reach the western United States in the coming days.</p> <p>Multiple large and powerful storms have hit California since New Year's Eve, making for a disastrous start to 2023 for the state. The most recent California storm killed at least four people and dumped nearly 10 inches of rain on southern parts of the state and around 2 feet of snow in the Sierra Nevada.</p>

Forecasters say the active pattern in the western U.S. will continue, and at least another pair of storms is set to pummel the region in the coming week. These additional waves of moisture will tap into a substantial [atmospheric river](#), bringing additional flooding risks.

The first storm is expected to set its sights more on the Northwest compared to its predecessors. The heaviest rain and mountain snow will focus on portions of Oregon, Washington and Northern California.

"While the wave of moisture aims for Oregon, parts of Central and Southern California will get a break from the heavy rainfall," explained AccuWeather Meteorologist Joseph Bauer.

The rain already overspread the northern portions of California on Wednesday and rounds of the same are forecast to persist through Friday. Widespread rainfall amounts of 1-3 inches are expected from southwestern British Columbia through western Washington, Oregon and Northern California. In southwestern Oregon and Northern California, several inches of rain are expected, and a few areas could receive more than 6 inches of additional rainfall.

Cities such as [Eureka](#), California, and [Medford](#), Oregon, are expected to get rounds of heavy rainfall through Friday. Some areas farther south, like [San Francisco](#) and [Sacramento](#), California, will receive some rain from this storm, but both metro areas were getting a one-day reprieve on Thursday.

"The active pattern [is] great news across the mountain ranges, in terms of building snowpack for later use; however, the heavy rain, gusty winds and snow will all be impactful to California," Bauer warned.

The relentless rainfall will renew the risks of flooding and landslides which could bring additional road closures. Precipitation is expected to fall as snow in the higher elevations, including in the Sierra Nevada and the Cascades. However, the fluctuation of rain and snow could bring an increased avalanche danger as well.

The second storm will move into the West Coast in time for the weekend and may pack a punch throughout California.

"More precipitation is expected to spread across the majority of California again on Saturday," Bauer said about the second storm.

The storm is expected to bring more flooding risks to the region as well as another round of gusty winds. This combination, following the astounding rainfall amounts already recorded in the state, could bring more damage to a beleaguered state already reeling from numerous mudslides and flood impacts.

"Tree damage and power outages could be more extensive with how wet the ground is already," Bauer said.

Through Jan. 11, downtown [Los Angeles](#) has picked up 5.28 inches of rain, which is 160 percent of normal for the city during the entire month. San Francisco has reported 5.89 inches of rain in the same time, which is 151 percent of normal for the month of January and more than four times the normal rainfall in the first 11 days of the month.

Airline travelers are likely to face another round of delays and possible cancellations at the major hubs of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Even airports that are not directly impacted by this storm can face a backlog of flights as crews and aircraft are displaced.

The weekend storm is likely to be rather quick-moving, with drier conditions expected by Sunday. However, rain and snow showers are forecast to expand into parts of Nevada, Utah and Arizona by the second half of the weekend.

Additional rounds of rain could be on the docket for California into the third week of the month as the current [La Niña](#) pattern continues to weaken, which would favor less intense storms overall and a general

	trend toward a northerly storm track along the West Coast. Still, some rounds of precipitation could sweep into the Golden State.
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Cyber, Tech Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/12 Illicit cryptocurrency activity all-time high
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/cryptocurrency-illicit-chainalysis-tornado-cash/
GIST	<p>Illicit cryptocurrency activity reached an all-time high of \$20.1 billion in 2022, increasing from \$18 billion the previous year in large part due to escalating U.S. sanctions targeting digital currencies, according to a report released Thursday by researchers at Chainalysis.</p> <p>Last year saw the U.S. government more aggressively sanction cryptocurrency-related entities and individuals, and nearly 44% of the \$20 billion in transactions classified as illicit by Chainalysis can be attributed to transactions linked to sanctioned entities.</p> <p>In classifying illicit cryptocurrency activity, Chainalysis included transactions tied to child sexual abuse materials, human trafficking, ransomware, stolen funds, terrorism financing, scams, cybercriminal administrators, dark net markets and sanctions.</p> <p>“This was the year that [Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control] kind of started to come out pretty hard with their sanctioning of services,” said Kim Grauer, head of research at Chainalysis. “And we’re seeing that in our numbers this year.”</p> <p>Among the 10 cryptocurrency-related groups sanctioned last year by the U.S. government were Tornado Cash, a mixing service that the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned in response to the North Korean hacking group Lazarus’s use of the technology to launder more than half a billion in stolen cryptocurrency. The move against Tornado Cash represented OFAC’s first sanctions against a decentralized protocol, a move that drew fierce criticism from blockchain industry leaders and privacy advocates that argued sanctioning the code overstepped the Treasury Department’s authorities.</p> <p>While sanctions have decreased the flow of digital funds to some sanctioned entities, the impact of OFAC sanctions have been uneven, according to a separate report by Chainalysis.</p> <p>After it was sanctioned, inflows to Tornado Cash decreased significantly. By contrast, after OFAC sanctioned the Russian exchange Garantex for its role in money laundering schemes transactions on the exchange grew significantly. Transactions on the sanctioned Hydra Marketplace, a dark web market popular with ransomware gangs and other cyber criminals, dropped to zero — but that was because its infrastructure was seized by German police.</p> <p>The cryptocurrency industry “is having to reckon with the fact that funds are still flowing to some of these services that have been sanctioned,” Grauer said.</p> <p>The illicit use of cryptocurrencies is a growing concern in Washington and has led the Treasury and Justice Departments to make major investments in tracing and combating crime relying on digital currencies. The U.S. Treasury Department is expected in coming weeks to release a report advising U.S. financial institutions on handling illicit finance risks.</p> <p>Nonetheless, illicit activity remains a small fraction of overall cryptocurrency activity. A mere .24% of all cryptocurrency transactions in 2022 were tied to illicit activity, up from .12% in 2021, according to Chainalysis’s figures.</p>

	<p>One explanation for the shift is a fall in legitimate cryptocurrency transactions this year thanks due to a rocky market for investors. “Scamming is down. Dark net market activity is down. Ransomware is down,” said Grauer. “We’re in a bear market, and that is certainly reflected in the high-level numbers for those illicit activities.”</p> <p>That turbulence may also be a reason that transaction volumes tied to cryptocurrency scams fell in 2022. Chainalysis researchers reported in August that revenue for cryptocurrency scammers dropped alongside sinking Bitcoin prices, suggesting that users are less likely to fall for scams promising big returns in a weak market.</p> <p>As of August, the top three cryptocurrency scams in 2022 had made just a fraction of the top scams in 2021, according to Chainalysis.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 IcedID malware strikes again
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2023/01/icedid-malware-strikes-again-active.html
GIST	<p>A recent IcedID malware attack enabled the threat actor to compromise the Active Directory domain of an unnamed target less than 24 hours after gaining initial access, while also borrowing techniques from other groups like Conti to meet its goals.</p> <p>"Throughout the attack, the attacker followed a routine of recon commands, credential theft, lateral movement by abusing Windows protocols, and executing Cobalt Strike on the newly compromised host," Cybereason researchers said in a report published this week.</p> <p>IcedID, also known by the name BokBot, started its life as a banking trojan in 2017 before evolving into a dropper for other malware, joining the likes of Emotet, TrickBot, Qakbot, Bumblebee, and Raspberry Robin.</p> <p>Attacks involving the delivery of IcedID have leveraged a variety of methods, especially in the wake of Microsoft's decision to block macros from Office files downloaded from the web.</p> <p>The intrusion detailed by Cybereason is no different in that the infection chain begins with an ISO image file contained within a ZIP archive that culminates in the execution of the IcedID payload.</p> <p>The malware then establishes persistence on the host via a scheduled task and communicates with a remote server to download next-stage payloads, including Cobalt Strike Beacon for follow-on reconnaissance activity.</p> <p>It also carries out lateral movement across the network and executes the same Cobalt Strike Beacon in all those workstations, and then proceeds to install Atera agent, a legitimate remote administration tool, as a redundant remote access mechanism.</p> <p>"Utilizing IT tools like this allows attackers to create an additional 'backdoor' for themselves in the event their initial persistence mechanisms are discovered and remediated," the researchers said. "These tools are less likely to be detected by antivirus or EDR and are also more likely to be written off as false positives."</p> <p>The Cobalt Strike Beacon is further used as a conduit to download a C# tool dubbed Rubeus for credential theft, ultimately permitting the threat actor to move laterally to a Windows Server with domain admin privileges.</p> <p>The elevated permissions are then weaponized to stage a DCSync attack, allowing the adversary to simulate the behavior of a domain controller (DC) and retrieve credentials from other domain controllers.</p> <p>Other tools used as part of the attack include a legitimate utility named netscan.exe to scan the network for lateral movement as well as the rclone file syncing software to exfiltrate directories of interest to the MEGA cloud storage service.</p>

	<p>It's worth noting that the use of Atgera agent and nescan.exe has been previously attributed to ransomware operations like Conti and LockBit, suggesting that criminal actors are taking a leaf out of their playbook.</p> <p>The findings come as researchers from Team Cymru shed more light on the BackConnect (BC) protocol used by IcedID to deliver additional functionality post compromise, including a VNC module that provides a remote-access channel.</p> <p>"In the case of BC, there appears to be two operators managing the overall process within distinct roles," the researchers noted last month, adding "much of the activity [...] occurs during the typical working week."</p> <p>The development also follows a report from Proofpoint in November 2022 that a resurgence in Emotet activity has been linked to the distribution of a new version of IcedID.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Hackers tailoring attacks to key sectors
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cyber-actors-tailoring-attacks/
GIST	<p>Cyber-threat actors are becoming increasingly efficient in the way they target key industries, operating like businesses, according to a new report by Darktrace.</p> <p>The study, which analyzed attack data relating to the energy, healthcare and retail sectors in 2022, showed that threat actors are tailoring their tactics to specific industries, based on efficiency and cost-effectiveness.</p> <p>Speaking to <i>Infosecurity</i>, Toby Lewis, global head of threat analysis at Darktrace, explained: "The reports reflect the ever-present reality that cyber-threat actors ultimately think like enterprises in what has become a multibillion-dollar industry: How can I make my hackers more efficient? How can we attack even more targets? How can I achieve better results with less resources?"</p> <p>He added that this approach will lead to a constant evolution of tactics, making attacks less predictable for cybersecurity teams.</p> <p>Crypto-mining in the Energy Sector Darktrace found that the energy sector experienced a huge rise in crypto-mining threats in 2022. In UK energy firms, high-priority crypto-mining accounted for a 13-times increase in the proportion of observed cyber-incidents compared to 2021, while in the US it was three-times more.</p> <p>Crypto-mining is where bad actors steal energy and processing power from other devices and networks. Energy suppliers are a particularly tempting target for this vector as they typically have a vast OT infrastructure with access to huge supplies of energy.</p> <p>While this technique is often viewed as insignificant compared to other forms of compromise, the researchers pointed out the cost and damage it can cause to organizations, such as slowing down systems and damaging productivity.</p> <p>Accessing a network illegitimately for crypto-jacking purposes can also be a precursor for more severe attacks to be launched, including ransomware.</p> <p>Lewis warned: "Neglecting the so-called small things like crypto-jacking is symptomatic of a wider problem in cyber, an ambivalence towards what is largely seen as the background noise of the internet."</p> <p>He highlighted the importance of preventing crypto-jacking to an organization's overall security posture: "To achieve the scale of deployment that crypto-jackers are looking for, illegitimate network access must have been enabled by something relatively low-cost: a pervasive software vulnerability or default, weak or otherwise compromised credentials. This means that if crypto-mining software could be installed, the basics aren't being done right somewhere," he said.</p>

In addition, the report noted that the prevalence crypto-mining is helping fund cyber-criminal and nation-state groups, helping grow cybercrime globally.

Attacks on Online Accounts in Retail

In the retail industry, cyber-criminals increasingly focused attacks on online accounts last year, as online shopping continued its huge growth post-COVID. For example, the researchers found that credential theft, spoofing and stuffing accounted for over a 170% growth in the proportion of all observed cyber incidents in the US retail sector compared to 2021. In Australia, there was a 70% increase and in the UK there was a rise of 14%.

Lewis highlighted the need for stronger authentication processes to be in place for online shopping accounts as a result.

“The rise in the proportion of credentials theft in the retail sector, which was seen across all three regions is also indicative of the new trend towards simply ‘logging in’ using stolen or leaked credentials and should act as a warning to organizations that a simple password and username are not enough of a barrier to ensure only trusted users have access to systems anymore.”

Healthcare a Major Target for Data Exfiltration

Healthcare organizations have been a [major target for ransomware attackers in recent years](#), with cyber-criminals viewing them as particularly ‘soft’ targets due to the potentially devastating disruption caused by taking hospital systems offline and the highly sensitive patient data these bodies hold.

In December 2022, a leading Canadian children’s hospital [was hit by a ransomware attack](#), which later saw the attackers handing over a free decryption key.

The Darktrace report observed a “notable rise” in data exfiltration threats targeting the UK and Australian healthcare sectors in 2022 compared to 2021. However, there was a decline in this attack vector in the US in the same period, although it remained the third most common threat observed.

Summing up the findings, Lewis commented: “The trends reveal crucial sector-specific challenges, from the tendency for hackers to siphon off the energy sector’s resources in the form of crypto-jacking, through to the invaluable nature of patient data which leads to data exfiltration in the healthcare sector.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Aflac, Zurich Japan customers data hacked
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/millions-insurance-compromised/
GIST	<p>Two insurance multi-nationals have revealed that millions of Japanese customers’ details were hacked and put up for sale after a third-party contractor was reportedly breached.</p> <p>Statements from Aflac and Zurich don’t name the breached supplier, but a local report from Tokyo-based news agency Jiji Press claimed the same US sub-contractor was to blame.</p> <p>In total, around two million customers were impacted by the incident – including 1.3 million enrolled in Aflac’s cancer insurance policies and 760,000 Zurich auto-insurance policyholders.</p> <p>Aflac said the compromised data included age, gender, last name, policy number, insurance type number and coverage amount/premium.</p> <p>“It should be noted that the above items of personal information leaked to the information leak site alone cannot identify an individual,” the insurer claimed. “Therefore, we believe that the possibility of the leaked information being misused by a third party is extremely low.”</p>

Aflac added that the sub-contractor which was originally compromised has deleted customer information from the server that was targeted. Aflac said it is taking unspecified additional “measures” to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

Separately, hackers managed to access customer information related to Zurich automobile insurance. Names, email addresses, policy numbers, customer IDs, dates of birth and vehicle information have reportedly been compromised.

Only Japanese customers of the two insurers are thought to have been impacted by the incident.

Lior Yaari, CEO and co-founder of [Grip Security](#), argued that compromised credentials are the most likely way hackers gained access to the server in question.

“Whether it’s a third party, former employee, overly permissive grants or dangling access on zombie accounts, the opportunity to exploit credentials and thereby gain access to sensitive information has never been more appealing,” he added.

“Which is one of the reasons third parties and their credentials to access client systems remain top attacker targets.”

Said Liat Hayun, CEO of [Eureka Security](#), argued that no organization can be trusted with critical data assets today.

“However, the reality is that organizations use third-party vendors to enable day-to-day operations,” he added. “It is best to work with third-party vendors who have the same, if not better, data security policies than your own organization to further accelerate day-to-day operations.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Europe police bust crypto fraud gang
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/police-bust-multimilliondollar/
GIST	<p>Law enforcers across Europe made multiple arrests this week as part of a crackdown on a criminal network suspected of running a large-scale crypto-investment fraud scheme.</p> <p>Coordinated by Europol, police made 14 arrests in Serbia and one in Germany, and questioned 261 individuals in the two countries, plus Cyprus and Bulgaria, as part of an action day on January 11.</p> <p>Some 22 locations were searched, including private homes and four call centers believed to have been used in the scheme, according to Europol.</p> <p>“The suspects used advertisements on social networks to lure victims to websites covertly operated by the criminals, which offered seemingly exceptional investment opportunities in cryptocurrencies,” the policing organization explained.</p> <p>“The victims, mainly from Germany, would first invest low, three-digit sums. Fake price hikes leading to supposedly lucrative profits for investors then persuaded them to make transfers of higher amounts.”</p> <p>Police estimated the financial damage to German victims at about €2m (\$2m) but claimed the number of unreported cases is likely to be far higher, with victims also located in Switzerland, Australia and Canada.</p> <p>It said that the criminal groups may have made hundreds of millions of euros as a result of the fraud schemes, which used call center scammers to persuade victims to part with their cash.</p> <p>During the action day, police also seized three hardware wallets with around \$1m worth of cryptocurrencies loaded on them, €50,000 (\$54,000) in cash, three vehicles, electronic equipment and data back-ups, and various documents.</p>

	<p>Call center operations are an increasingly popular way for fraud rings to social engineer their victims.</p> <p>Earlier this month Ukrainian police busted a call center operation accused of defrauding an estimated 18,000 Kazakhstani victims. The staff would call their targets, claiming to work in their bank's IT department.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Credential-stealing flaw Google Chrome
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/google-chrome-flaw-credential-steal/
GIST	<p>The cyber security researchers at Imperva Red Team have shared details of a recently discovered and patched vulnerability that impacted over 2.5 billion Google Chrome users and all Chromium-based browsers, including Opera and Edge.</p> <p>Vulnerability Details</p> <p>The vulnerability is tracked as CVE-2022-3656, allowing remote attackers to steal sensitive user data like cloud service provider credentials and crypto wallet details. Further probe revealed that the issue emerged due to how the Chrome browser interacted with symlinks while processing directories and files.</p> <p>As per Imperva's researcher Ron Masas, the browser didn't check whether the symlink pointed to a location that wasn't accessible, encouraging the stealing of sensitive files. Google characterized it as a medium-severity vulnerability caused due to inadequate data validation in File System. The company released a fix in the Chromium versions 107 and 108 released in Oct and Nov 2022, respectively.</p> <p>What is SymStealer?</p> <p>In their report, Imperva researchers named the flaw SymStealer. The issue occurs when the attacker exploits the File System to evade program restrictions and access unauthorized files. Imperva's analysis revealed that when a user drags and drops a folder directly onto a file input element, the browser recursively resolves all symlinks without displaying a warning.</p> <p>For your information, a symlink is also called a symbolic link. It is a file that points to a directory or file and lets the OS treat it as if it was stored at the symlink's location. Usually, this feature helps users in creating shortcuts, file organisation, and redirect file paths.</p> <p>But Imperva's research revealed that this feature could be exploited to introduce vulnerabilities such as this one that emerged due to how browsers interacted with symlinks for file/directories processing. This issue is also called symbolic link following.</p> <p>Attack Scenario</p> <p>Through this weakness, the attacker can trick a victim into accessing a compromised website and download a ZIP archive file that contains the symlink to a valuable folder or file present on the device e.g. wallet keys. When this file is uploaded back to this site as an infection chain component like a crypto wallet service, the user is prompted to upload their recovery keys.</p> <p>The attacker can now traverse the symbolic link and access the original file storing the key phrase. Imperva researchers devised a proof-of-concept using CSS trickery to modify the file input element's size so that the file uploads regardless of where the folder drops on the page and information is stolen successfully.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Zero-day targeted government networks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fortinet-govt-networks-targeted-with-now-patched-ssl-vpn-zero-day/
GIST	Fortinet says unknown attackers exploited a FortiOS SSL-VPN zero-day vulnerability patched last month in attacks against government organizations and government-related targets.

The security flaw ([CVE-2022-42475](#)) abused in these incidents is a heap-based buffer overflow weakness found in the FortiOS SSLVPNd that allowed unauthenticated attackers to crash targeted devices remotely or gain remote code execution.

The network security company [urged customers](#) in mid-December to patch their appliances against ongoing attacks exploiting this vulnerability after quietly fixing the bug on November 28 in FortiOS 7.2.3 (and without releasing information that it was a zero-day).

Customers were privately alerted of this issue on December 7 via a TLP:Amber advisory. More information was released publicly on December 12, including a warning that the bug was being actively exploited in attacks.

"Fortinet is aware of an instance where this vulnerability was exploited in the wild," the company said at the time, recommending admins to immediately check their systems against a list of indicators of compromise shared in [this advisory](#).

This Wednesday, Fortinet published a follow-up report revealing that attackers were using CVE-2022-42475 exploits to compromise FortiOS SSL-VPN appliances to deploy malware deployed as a trojanized version of the IPS Engine.

Zero-day used to target government networks

The company said the threat actor's attacks were highly targeted, with evidence found during analysis showing a focus on government networks.

"The complexity of the exploit suggests an advanced actor and that it is highly targeted at governmental or government-related targets," Fortinet [said](#).

"The discovered Windows sample attributed to the attacker displayed artifacts of having been compiled on a machine in the UTC+8 timezone, which includes Australia, China, Russia, Singapore, and other Eastern Asian countries."

The attackers were heavily focused on maintaining persistence and evading detection by using the vulnerability to install malware that patches FortiOS logging processes so that specific log entries could be removed, or to even kill the logging processes if necessary.

Additional payloads downloaded on compromised appliances revealed that the malware also broke the compromised devices' Intrusion Prevention System (IPS) functionality designed to detect threats by constantly monitoring network traffic to block security violation attempts.

"The malware patches the logging processes of FortiOS to manipulate logs to evade detection," Fortinet said.

"The malware can manipulate log files. It searches for elog files, which are logs of events in FortiOS. After decompressing them in memory, it searches for a string the attacker specifies, deletes it, and reconstructs the logs."

Fortinet warned that further malicious payloads were downloaded from a remote site during attacks but could not be retrieved for analysis.

The company concluded that the threat actor behind last month's CVE-2022-42475 exploitation shows "advanced capabilities," including the ability to reverse-engineer parts of the FortiOS operating system.

It also advised customers to immediately upgrade to a patched version of FortiOS to block attack attempts and reach out to Fortinet support if they find indicators of compromise linked to the December attacks.

HEADLINE	01/12 Vice Society attacks Australia firefighters
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/vice-society-ransomware-claims-attack-on-australian-firefighting-service/
GIST	<p>Australia's Fire Rescue Victoria has disclosed a data breach caused by a December cyberattack that is now claimed by the Vice Society ransomware gang.</p> <p>Fire Rescue Victoria (FRVP) is a fire and rescue service operating across 85 stations in the Australian state of Victoria that has approximately 4,500 operational and corporate employees.</p> <p>The cyberattack on FRV occurred on December 15, 2022, and despite the widespread and ongoing IT outages it has caused, the agency's emergency response services have not been impacted.</p> <p>Continue watchingRAT malware campaign tries to evade detection using polyglot filesafter the ad</p> <p>"The incident affected a number of our internal servers, including our email system," explains FRV in an announcement on its site.</p> <p>"While we continue to experience a widespread IT outage as a result of the attack, community safety has not been compromised, and we continue to dispatch crews and appliances through mobile phones, pagers, and radio." - FRV.</p> <p>In addition to disrupting the agency's IT system, the hackers have also stolen data from FRV's computers, including information about current and former employees, contractors, secondees, and job applicants.</p> <p>The agency notified the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner about the incident on January 6, 2023, disclosing the preliminary results of its ongoing internal investigation.</p> <p>According to parts of the notice that were made public, the hackers have stolen the following information on FRV staff and applicants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Full Name ▪ Address (current and previous) ▪ Email address (current and previous) ▪ Phone number (current and previous) ▪ Date of birth ▪ Health information ▪ Sensitive information such as information about sexual orientation, race, disability, religion, qualifications, employment history, criminal history, and political or religious views. ▪ Bank account details (BSB, account name, and number) ▪ Superannuation details ▪ Government-issued identity information ▪ Driver's license details ▪ Passport details ▪ Tax File numbers ▪ Birth, death, and marriage certificates <p>In addition to the above, because the hackers accessed the agency's email system, which remains offline, they may also have accessed or stolen sensitive email communications.</p> <p>FRV is warning all employees and everyone else who previously applied for a job to be vigilant against targeted phishing emails or SMS texts.</p> <p>Furthermore, the organization recommends that staff reset their passwords and enable MFA to protect their accounts further. If staff use their FRV password on other sites, they should also reset them.</p> <p>Attack claimed by Vice Society Ransomware</p>

	<p>This data breach notifications comes after the Vice Society ransomware gang claimed to be behind the attack on Fire Rescue Victoria and indicated they would start leaking stolen data.</p> <p>On January 10th, an entry for Fire Rescue Victoria appeared on Vice Ransomware's Tor data leak site, with a link to allegedly stolen data.</p> <p>However, this link currently does not work, granting the fire rescue organization a likely unintended reprieve from their data becoming public.</p> <p>While some ransomware operations have policies against targeting emergency services and healthcare entities, Vice Society tends to attack any entity they can breach.</p> <p>These victims include various industries, including the education, healthcare, and local government sectors.</p> <p>The ransomware operation launched in January 2021, when they began utilizing other ransomware gang's malware as part of their attacks, including BlackCat, QuantumLocker, Zeppelin, a Vice Society-branded variant of Zeppelin ransomware, and Hello Kitty encryptors.</p> <p>More recently, the threat actors have switched to a new custom encryptor that researchers have dubbed 'PolyVice.'</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Cuba ransomware hack Exchange servers
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/microsoft-cuba-ransomware-hacking-exchange-servers-via-owassrf-flaw/
GIST	<p>Microsoft says Cuba ransomware threat actors are hacking Microsoft Exchange servers unpatched against a critical server-side request forgery (SSRF) vulnerability also exploited in Play ransomware attacks.</p> <p>Cloud computing provider Rackspace recently confirmed that Play ransomware used a zero-day exploit dubbed OWASSRF targeting this bug (CVE-2022-41080) to compromise unpatched Microsoft Exchange servers on its network after bypassing ProxyNotShell URL rewrite mitigations.</p> <p>According to Microsoft, the Play ransomware gang has abused this security flaw since late November 2022. The company advises customers to prioritize CVE-2022-41080 patching to block potential attacks.</p> <p>Redmond says that this SSRF vulnerability has also been exploited since at least November 17th by another threat group it tracks as DEV-0671 to hack Exchange servers and deploy Cuba ransomware payloads.</p> <p>Microsoft shared this info in a January update to a private threat analytics report seen by BleepingComputer and available to customers with Microsoft 365 Defender, Microsoft Defender for Endpoint Plan 2, or Microsoft Defender for Business subscriptions.</p> <p>While Microsoft released security updates to address this SSRF Exchange vulnerability on November 8th and has provided some of its customers with info that ransomware gangs are using the flaw, the advisory is yet to be updated to warn that it's being exploited in the wild.</p> <p>Patch your Exchange servers against OWASSRF attacks</p> <p>The OWASSRF exploit spotted by CrowdStrike security researchers on Rackspaces's network was also shared online together with some of Play ransomware's other malicious tools.</p> <p>This will make it easier for other cybercriminals to adapt Play ransomware's tooling for their own purposes or create their own custom CVE-2022-41080 exploits, adding to the urgency of patching the vulnerability as soon as possible.</p>

On Tuesday, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) also ordered Federal Civilian Executive Branch Agencies (FCEB) agencies to patch their systems against this bug by January 31st and [strongly urged](#) all organizations to secure their Exchange servers to thwart exploitation attempts.

Organizations with on-premises Microsoft Exchange servers on their networks should deploy the latest Exchange security updates immediately (with November 2022 as the minimum patch level) or disable Outlook Web Access (OWA) until they can apply CVE-2022-41080 patches.

Cuba ransomware behind more than 100 attacks worldwide

The FBI and CISA [revealed](#) in a joint security advisory issued last month that the Cuba ransomware gang has raked in more than \$60 million in ransoms as of August 2022 after breaching over 100 victims worldwide.

Although this paints a bleak picture, samples submitted by victims to the ID-Ransomware platform analysis show that the gang is not very active, proving that even a somewhat inactive ransomware operation can have a huge impact.

Another FBI advisory from December 2021 warned that the ransomware group had [compromised at least 49 organizations](#) from U.S. critical infrastructure sectors.

In both advisories, the FBI strongly urged reporting Cuba ransomware attacks to local FBI field offices and asked victims to share related information with their local FBI Cyber Squad to help identify the ransomware gang's members and the cybercriminals they're working with.

While not as prolific as Cuba ransomware and although first spotted a lot more recently, in June 2022, Play ransomware has been quite active and has already hit dozens of victims worldwide, including [Rackspace](#), the [German H-Hotels hotel chain](#), the [Belgium city of Antwerp](#), and [Argentina's Judiciary of Córdoba](#).

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HEADLINE	01/12 Android TV box w/malware pre-installed
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/android-tv-box-on-amazon-came-pre-installed-with-malware/
GIST	<p>A Canadian systems security consultant discovered that an Android TV box purchased from Amazon was pre-loaded with persistent, sophisticated malware baked into its firmware.</p> <p>The malware was discovered by Daniel Milisic, who created a script and instructions to help users nullify the payload and stop its communication with the C2 (command and control) server.</p> <p>The device in question is the T95 Android TV box with an AllWinner T616 processor, widely available through Amazon, AliExpress, and other big e-commerce platforms.</p> <p>It is unclear if this single device was affected or if all devices from this model or brand include the malicious component.</p> <p>Malware on the TV streaming box</p> <p>The T95 streaming device uses an Android 10-based ROM signed with test keys and the ADB (Android Debug Bridge) open over Ethernet and WiFi.</p> <p>This is a suspicious configuration as ADB can be used to connect to devices for unrestricted filesystem access, command execution, software installation, data modification, and remote control.</p> <p>However, as most consumer streaming devices sit behind a firewall, threat actors will likely be unable to connect to ADB remotely.</p>

Milisic says he initially bought this device to run the [Pi-hole DNS sinkhole](#), which protects devices from unwanted content, advertisements, and malicious sites without installing software.

While analyzing the DNS request in Pi-hole, Milisic discovered that the device was attempting to connect to several IP addresses associated with active malware.

Milisic believes the malware installed on the device is a strain that resembles 'CopyCat,' a sophisticated Android malware [first discovered by Check Point](#) in 2017. This malware was previously seen in an adware campaign where it infected 14 million Android devices to make its operators over \$1,500,000 in profits.

The analyst tested the stage-1 malware sample on [VirusTotal](#), where it returns only 13 detections out of 61 AV engine scans, classified with the generic term of an Android trojan downloader.

"I found layers on top of layers of malware using 'tcpflow' and 'nethogs' to monitor traffic and traced it back to the offending process/APK, which I then removed from the ROM," explains the analyst in a [GitHub post](#).

"The final bit of malware I could not track down injects the 'system_server' process and looks to be deeply baked into the ROM."

The analyst observed that the malware attempted to fetch additional payloads from 'ycxrl.com,' 'cbphe.com,' and 'cbpheback.com.'

Because finding a clean ROM to replace the malicious is just as challenging, Milisic resorted to changing the DNS of the C2 to route the requests via the Pi-hole web server, making it possible to block them.

Users of T95 are recommended to follow these two simple steps to clean their device and nullify the malware that runs on it:

1. Reboot into recovery mode or perform "Factory Reset" from the settings menu.
2. Upon reboot, connect to ADB via USB or WiFi-Ethernet and [run this script](#).

To confirm that the malware has been rendered harmless, run "adb logcat | grep Corejava" and verify that the chmod command failed to execute.

However, as these devices are fairly inexpensive on Amazon, it may be wiser to discontinue using them if you can afford to do so.

An ambiguous electronics market

Unfortunately, these inexpensive Android-based TV box devices follow an obscure route from manufacturing in China to global market availability.

In many cases, these devices are sold under multiple brands and device names, with no clear indication of where they originate.

Furthermore, as the devices commonly flow through many hands, vendors and re-sellers have several opportunities to load custom ROMs on the devices, potentially malicious ones.

Even if most e-commerce sites have policies to prevent selling devices pre-loaded with malware, enforcing these rules by scrutinizing all electronics and confirming they're free of sophisticated malware is practically impossible.

To avoid such risks, you can pick streaming devices from reputable vendors like Google Chromecast, Apple TV, NVIDIA Shield, Amazon Fire TV, and Roku Stick.

	BleepingComputer attempted to contact the listed seller on Amazon but could not find any website or email address associated with the brand.
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HEADLINE	01/12 StrRAT, Ratty RAT new polyglot campaign
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/rat-malware-campaign-tries-to-evade-detection-using-polyglot-files/
GIST	<p>Operators of the StrRAT and Ratty remote access trojans (RAT) are running a new campaign using polyglot MSI/JAR and CAB/JAR files to evade detection from security tools.</p> <p>The campaign was spotted by Deep Instinct, which reports that the threat actors achieve moderate success in evading detection by anti-virus engines. This is notable considering how old and well-documented the two particular RATs are.</p> <p>Polyglot files combine two or more file formats in a way that makes it possible for them to be interpreted and launched by multiple different applications without error.</p> <p>Threat actors have been using polyglot files to hide malicious code, confuse security solutions, and bypass protections for several years now.</p> <p>Most recently, we reported about this technique being employed by the StrelaStealer malware that targets Outlook and Thunderbird accounts.</p> <p>Despite Microsoft's efforts to address the problem by implementing a signature-based detection system, there are ways to bypass this protection, so polyglot files continue to be used for malicious purposes.</p> <p>RAT polyglot campaign</p> <p>One notable case that has been employed since 2018, which is also what Deep Instinct observed in the latest RAT distribution campaign, is the combination of JAR and MSI formats into a single file.</p> <p>JAR files are archives identified as such by a record at their end, while in MSI, the file type identifier is a "magic header" at the beginning of the file, so threat actors can easily combine the two formats into a single file.</p> <p>This dual format allows them to be executed as an MSI in Windows and also executed as a JAR file by the Java runtime.</p> <p>JARs are not executables, so they're not as vigorously checked by anti-virus tools. Unfortunately, this allows them to hide malicious code and trick the AV into scanning the MSI part of the file, which should come out clean.</p> <p>Deep Instinct noticed CAB/JAR combinations instead of MSI in other cases involving the same two RAT families. CABs are also good candidates for polyglot combinations with JARs because they, too, feature a magic header for file type interpretation.</p> <p>The polyglots used in this campaign are spread by Sendgrid and URL shortening services like Cutt.ly and Rebrand.ly, while the fetched StrRAT and Ratty payloads are stored in Discord.</p> <p>In terms of detection, the CAB/JAR polyglots return six positives out of 59 AV engines on Virus Total, while 30 security vendors identify the MSI/JAR polyglots. Hence, the detection rate ranges between 10% and 50%.</p> <p>Deep Instinct reports that many of the examined polyglots for both StrRAT and Ratty use the same C2 address and are hosted by the same Bulgarian hosting firm.</p>

	Hence, it's possible that both strains are used in a single campaign run by the same operator.
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HEADLINE	01/12 Darkweb ad: access Telegram servers
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/20k-buys-insider-access-telegram-servers-dark-web-ad-claims
GIST	<p>For the non-negotiable price of \$20,000, threat actors claim they can provide insider access to Telegram servers running the encrypted instant messaging platform preferred by a security-conscious clientele.</p> <p>The ad, posted on a Dark Web marketplace and discovered by the researchers of SafetyDetectives, boasts that the access is high-level and provided "through their employees."</p> <p>Rather than providing remote access, the seller is hawking "an offering of correspondence for six months," the SafetyDetectives team added.</p> <p>"It is impossible to say how many users, or Telegram servers, may be impacted," the report explained. "However, if the vendor's claims are valid, an insider in the internal Telegram network would be able to exfiltrate logs and compromise user data."</p> <p>Meanwhile, it seems Telegram might have a broader phishing problem.</p> <p>Phishing Explodes on Telegram</p> <p>The discovery comes on the heels of the release of new data from Cofense that shows that the abuse of Telegram bots exploded by 800% in 2022, driven by threat actors using malicious HTML attachments to deliver credential phishing attempts. Telegram bots are also attractive to spear-phishers because they're free and easy to set up and run.</p> <p>"Threat actors appreciate the ease of setting up bots in a private or group chat, the bots' compatibility with a wide range of programming languages, and ease of integrations into malicious mediums such as malware or credential phishing kits," the Cofense report said. "Coupling the ease of Telegram bot setup and use with the popular and successful tactic of attaching an HTML credential phishing file to an email, a threat actor can quickly and efficiently reach inboxes while exfiltrating credentials to a single point using an often-trusted service."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 AI-generated phishing emails convincing
SOURCE	https://www.theregister.com/2023/01/11/gpt3_phishing_emails/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>GPT-3 language models are being abused to do much more than write college essays, according to WithSecure researchers.</p> <p>The security shop's latest report [PDF] details how researchers used prompt engineering to produce spear-phishing emails, social media harassment, fake news stories and other types of content that would prove useful to cybercriminals looking to improve their online scams or simply sew chaos, albeit with mixed results in some cases.</p> <p>And, spoiler alert, yes, a robot did help write the report.</p> <p>"In addition to providing responses, GPT-3 was employed to help with definitions for the text of the commentary of this article," WithSecure's Andrew Patel and Jason Sattler wrote.</p> <p>For the research, the duo conducted a series of experiments to determine how changing the input to the language model affected the text output. These covered seven criminal use cases: phishing and spear-phishing, harassment, social validation for scams, the appropriation of a written style, the creation of deliberately divisive opinions, using the models to create prompts for malicious text, and fake news.</p>

And perhaps unsurprisingly, GPT-3 proved to be helpful at crafting a convincing email thread to use in a phishing campaign and social media posts, complete with hashtags, to harass a made-up CEO of a robotics company.

When writing the prompts, more information is better, and so is adding placeholders such as [person1], [emailaddress1], [linkaddress1], which also benefits automation because the placeholders can be programmatically replaced post-generation, the researchers noted. This also had an extra benefit for criminals in that it prevents errors from OpenAI's API that occur when it is asked to create phishes.

In another test, the report authors asked GPT-3 to generate fake news stories because, as they wrote, "one of the most obvious uses for a large language model would be the creation of fake news." The researchers prompted GPT-3 to write an article blaming the US for the Nordstream 2 pipeline attack in 2022.

Because the language model used in the experiments was trained in June 2021, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the authors subsequently used a series of prompts that included excerpts from Wikipedia and other sources about the war, pipeline damage, and the US Naval maneuvers in the Baltic Sea.

The resulting "news stories," without the 2022 information, generated factually incorrect content. However, "the fact that only three copy-paste snippets had to be prepended to the prompt in order to create a believable enough narrative suggests that it isn't going to be all that difficult to get GPT-3 to do write a specifically tailored article or opinion piece, even with regards to complex subjects," the report noted.

But, with long-form content, as other researchers have pointed out, GPT-3 sometimes breaks a sentence halfway through, suggesting that human editors will still be needed to craft or at least proofread text, malicious or otherwise — for now.

Finally, while the report highlights the potential dangers posed by GPT-3, it fails to propose any solutions to address these threats. Without a clear framework for mitigating the risks posed by GPT-3, any efforts to protect against malicious use of these technologies will be ineffective, it warns.

The bottom line, according to the researchers, is that large language models give criminals better tools to create targeted communications in their cyberattacks — especially those without the necessary writing skills and cultural knowledge to draft this type of text on their own. This means it is going to continue to get more difficult for platform providers and intended scam victims to identify malicious and fake content written by an AI.

"We'll need mechanisms to identify malicious content generated by large language models," the authors said. "One step towards the goal would be to identify that content was generated by those models. However, that alone would not be sufficient, given that large language models will also be used to generate legitimate content."

In addition to using GPT-3 to help generate definitions, the authors also asked the AI to review their research. And in one of the examples, the robot nails it:

"While the report does an excellent job of highlighting the potential dangers posed by GPT-3, it fails to propose any solutions to address these threats," the GPT-3 generated review said. "Without a clear framework for mitigating the risks posed by GPT-3, any efforts to protect against malicious use of these technologies will be ineffective."

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HEADLINE	01/12 Meta sues to block surveillance company
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jan/12/meta-voyager-labs-surveillance-fake-accounts
GIST	Meta has sued to block a surveillance company from using Facebook and Instagram, alleging the firm, which has partnered with law enforcement, created tens of thousands of fake accounts to collect user data.

A [complaint filed](#) on Thursday asks a judge to permanently ban Voyager Labs from accessing Meta's sites and comes after a [Guardian investigation](#) revealed the company had partnered with the Los Angeles police department (LAPD) in 2019 and claimed that it could use social media information to predict who [may commit a future crime](#).

Public [records](#) obtained by the Brennan Center for Justice, a non-profit organization, and shared with the Guardian in 2021, showed that Voyager's services enabled police to surveil and investigate people by reconstructing their digital lives and making assumptions about their activity, including their network of friends. In one internal record, Voyager suggested that it considered using an Instagram name displaying Arab pride or tweeting about Islam to be signs of potential extremism.

The lawsuit in federal court in California details activities that Meta says it uncovered in July 2022, alleging that Voyager used surveillance software that relied on fake accounts to scrape data from Facebook and Instagram, as well as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Telegram. Voyager created and operated more than 38,000 fake Facebook accounts to collect information from more than 600,000 Facebook users, including posts, likes, friends lists, photos, comments and information from groups and pages, according to the complaint.

The affected users included employees of non-profits, universities, media organizations, healthcare facilities, the US armed forces and local, state and federal government agencies, along with full-time parents, retirees and union members, Meta said in its filing. It is unclear who Voyager's clients were at that time and what entities may have received the data. But Voyager, which has offices in the US, the United Kingdom, Israel, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, designed its software to hide its presence from Meta and sold and licensed for profit the data it obtained, the suit says.

"Our hope is to amplify this message that this is not the right way to police people or the public," Jessica Romero, Meta's director of platform enforcement and litigation, said in an interview. "Some of the types of people that were impacted really don't fit the kind of criminal profile that Voyager tries to sell as the focus of their data collection and analysis."

Voyager representatives did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

Some features that Voyager advertised in the records obtained by the Brennan Center posed significant ethical questions, including one the company called an "active persona" which appeared to facilitate police use of fake profiles to gain access to otherwise private information on Facebook.

In November 2021, after the internal records were revealed, Facebook sent the LAPD a letter demanding that it cease all social media surveillance use of "dummy" accounts, saying fake accounts were a violation of the company's policy requiring that people use their real names. The Meta-owned platform also said at the time that using data obtained from the platform for "surveillance, including the processing of platform data about people, groups, or events for law enforcement or national security purposes" was prohibited.

While it is unclear whether the LAPD ultimately used the fake profile feature while working with Voyager, emails showed that officers said it was a "great function" and a "need-to-have" service.

Voyager is a part of a broader industry of better-known players like Palantir that purport to make crime predictions based on past behaviors and activity including those shared on social media. While the practice has been criticized by privacy and civil liberty advocates as pseudoscience that does little more than perpetuate bias and discrimination in policing, law enforcement continues to be eager to acquire solutions that purport to make their jobs more efficient and, in turn, validate their decisions. And tech firms working to offset the industry's slowing growth have increasingly answered law enforcement's call for new surveillance and policing products.

	<p>“This is an industry that has a lot of technical capabilities, some of which are pretty sophisticated and yet there’s no oversight or accountability,” Romero said. “We view this as us doing our part to bring to light the kinds of information and conduct we’ve uncovered.”</p> <p>Rachel Levinson-Waldman, managing director of the Brennan Center’s liberty and national security program, said Meta’s lawsuit demonstrated how software tools like Voyager’s can enable mass scraping of data: “It’s a really wide range of people who have been affected by this, and the public should notice and be alarmed by the scope of this kind of collection.”</p> <p>She said the case could also have an impact beyond Voyager and should discourage police from pursuing these kinds of technologies: “It sends a pretty clear signal generally to the surveillance-for-hire industry that they could face legal action, and I hope it also sends a signal to police departments and other law enforcement agencies that are considering these tools.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Woman in remote-work to repay: time theft
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/12/canada-woman-time-theft-tracking-software
GIST	<p>A Canadian woman has been ordered by a civil tribunal to compensate her former employer for “time theft” after she was caught misrepresenting hours worked by controversial tracking software.</p> <p>Karlee Besse, who worked remotely as an accountant in British Columbia, initially claimed she was fired from her job without cause last year and sought C\$5,000 (\$3,729; £3,066) in compensation – both in unpaid wages and severance.</p> <p>But the company, Reach CPA, told the tribunal Beese had logged more than 50 hours that “did not appear to have spent on work-related tasks”.</p> <p>Reach said it installed employee-tracking software called TimeCamp on Besse’s work laptop after it found her assigned files were over budget and behind schedule, a strategy companies are increasingly taking in the era of remote work.</p> <p>The software tracks how long a document is open, how the employee uses the document and logs the time as work.</p> <p>Weeks later, the company said an analysis “identified irregularities between her timesheets and the software usage logs”.</p> <p>While Besse told the tribunal she found the program “difficult” and worried it didn’t differentiate between work and personal use, the company demonstrated how TimeCamp automatically makes those distinctions, separating time logs for work from activities such as using the laptop to stream movies and television shows.</p> <p>Besse said she had printed documents to work on, but did not tell Reach she was using hard copy because she “knew they wouldn’t want to hear that” and she was afraid of repercussions.</p> <p>The company said that the software also tracks printing – and that few documents had been logged as printed. It also said any work from the printed documents would have needed to be input into the company’s software, which never happened.</p> <p>According to a video meeting between Besse and the company when they confronted her with the discrepancies, she told her manager “you can’t fight the time”, admitting she had “plugged time to files that I didn’t touch and that wasn’t right or appropriate in any way or fashion ... and so for that I’m really sorry”.</p> <p>The judge tossed out Besse’s claim of wrongful termination and ordered her to pay C\$2,459.89, both in returned wages and as a part of previous advance she had received from the company.</p>

HEADLINE	01/12 Bipartisan crackdown on TikTok grows
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/12/bipartisan-crackdown-tiktok-grows-wisconsin-govern/
GIST	<p>Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers on Thursday banned TikTok from state-issued devices, joining a small collection of fellow Democrats blocking the popular social media app amid growing concerns about its connections to China.</p> <p>The governor said his team had regular conversations with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and counterintelligence specialists before he ordered the blockade.</p> <p>“Defending our state’s technology and cybersecurity infrastructure and protecting digital privacy will continue to be a top priority,” Mr. Evers tweeted.</p> <p>U.S. policymakers have long feared that Americans’ data on TikTok is accessible to China’s government because TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company. China’s policies of civil-military fusion remove barriers between the government and the commercial sector, compelling businesses to cooperate with the communist regime.</p> <p>Mr. Evers’ ban follows in the footsteps of other Democratic governors and several GOP governors that cracked down on TikTok in 2022.</p> <p>Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey said earlier this week he was ordering a TikTok ban from state devices. Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly of Kansas imposed a similar ban late last year.</p> <p>Mr. Evers faced political pressure in Wisconsin to crack down on TikTok. Six Wisconsin GOP lawmakers, including Sen. Ron Johnson and Rep. Mike Gallagher, wrote to Mr. Evers in December urging him to issue a TikTok ban from state government devices.</p> <p>Congress banned TikTok last month from most U.S. government-issued devices. Mr. Gallagher has championed additional restrictions.</p> <p>He authored a bipartisan bill proposing a wider TikTok ban with Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, Illinois Democrat, and Mr. Gallagher leading the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the U.S. and the Chinese Communist Party.</p> <p>President Biden’s administration has not announced a final determination about broader restrictions on TikTok. Mr. Biden continued a review of TikTok started by the Trump administration.</p> <p>TikTok spokesperson Jamal Brown said Thursday the platform is working with the federal government to finalize a solution to address concerns at the federal and state levels.</p> <p>“We’re disappointed that so many states are jumping on the political bandwagon to enact policies that will do nothing to advance cybersecurity in their states and are based on unfounded falsehoods about TikTok,” Mr. Brown said in a statement. “TikTok is loved by millions of Americans, and it is unfortunate that the many state agencies, offices, universities, student groups, and sports teams in those states will no longer be able to use TikTok to build communities and share information.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Students find new way to cheat thru A.I.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/12/educators-object-chatgpt-ai-writes-papers-students/
GIST	Educators across the U.S. are sounding the alarm over ChatGPT, an upstart artificial intelligence system that can write term papers for students based on keywords without clear signs of plagiarism.

“I have a lot of experience of students cheating, and I have to say ChatGPT allows for an unprecedented level of dishonesty,” said Joy Kutaka-Kennedy, a member of the American Educational Research Association and an education professor at National University. “Do we really want professionals serving us who cheated their way into their credentials?”

Trey Vasquez, a special education professor at the University of Central Florida, recently tested the next-generation “chatbot” with a group of other professors and students. They asked it to summarize an academic article, create a computer program, and write two 400-word essays on the uses and limits of AI in education.

“I can give the machine a prompt that would take my grad students hours to write a paper on, and it spits something out in 3 to 5 seconds,” Mr. Vasquez told The Washington Times. “But it’s not perfect.”

He said he would grade the essays as C’s, but he added that the program helped a student with cerebral palsy write more efficiently.

Other educators familiar with the software said they have no way of telling whether their students have used ChatGPT to cheat on winter exams.

“I really don’t know,” said Thomas Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University. “As a college professor, I’m worried about how to manage this issue and need help from knowledgeable folks to figure out how to proceed.”

New York City, which has the nation’s largest public school system, restricted ChatGPT from campus devices and networks after students returned this month from winter break.

Yet teachers have been unable to keep students from using the software at home since its launch on Nov. 30.

Education insiders say millions of students have likely downloaded the program and started submitting work with the program’s assistance.

“Most of the major players in the plagiarism detection space are working to catch up with the sudden capabilities of ChatGPT, but they aren’t there yet,” said Scott Bailey, assistant provost of education professions at the American College of Education.

San Francisco-based OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, has pledged to address academic dishonesty concerns by creating a coded watermark for content that only educators can identify.

In addition, several independent software developers and plagiarism detector Turnitin say they have found ways to identify the AI by its “extremely average” writing, but none of these tools is widely available yet. Rank-and-file instructors say it’s hard to identify “plagiarism” that isn’t based on existing work.

The debate is similar to what teachers faced when students started buying calculators years ago, said Liz Repkin, a K-12 education consultant who owns the Illinois-based Cyber Safety Consulting.

“We are seeing two sides to the argument, ban it or allow it, the age-old dilemma,” said Ms. Repkin, whose three children are in middle school, high school and college. “I believe we should take the more painful and slow approach that partners with students to use the technology that is out there in safe and ethical ways.”

Some cybertechnology specialists have come to see the program as Frankenstein’s monster — a well-intended innovation that is doing more harm than good.

OpenAI designed ChatGPT to help write emails, essays and coding, but authorities say criminals have started using it for espionage, ransomware and malicious spam.

The chatbot presents the illusion of talking with a friend who wants to do your work for you. It can compose essays on suggested topics, churn out lyrics to a song and write software code without many specifics from the user.

The system generates content from a massive database by using two algorithms for language modeling and similar prompts. ChatGPT gets smarter with each use.

“As technologies like ChatGPT become increasingly mainstream, it will elevate the risk of academic dishonesty if the methods of assessment and measuring knowledge don’t also evolve,” said Steven Tom, a vice president at Adtalem Global Education, a Chicago-based network of for-profit colleges.

Take-home essays are the likeliest assignments where students will cheat if teachers don’t adjust to the technology, he said in an email.

“Don’t rely solely on the essay but rather employ multiple types of assessment in a course,” Mr. Tom said.

More sophisticated assignments have been able to outsmart ChatGPT, but just barely.

Some law school professors fed the bar exam into the program last month. The chatbot earned passing scores on evidence and torts but failed the multiple choice questions, Reuters reported.

Those scholars predict that ChatGPT will be able to ace the attorney licensing test as more students use it.

Some teachers also could misuse ChatGPT to “teach to the test” instead of fostering critical thinking skills, said Aly Legge of Moms for America, a conservative parental rights group.

“We have a school culture and societal culture that does not foster personal responsibility by teaching children that their actions have consequences,” Ms. Legge said in an email. “We must keep in mind that ChatGPT will only be as dangerous as we allow it.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 New stealer spreads thru Google ads
SOURCE	https://blog.cyble.com/2023/01/12/rhadamanthys-new-stealer-spreading-through-google-ads/
GIST	<p>Threat Actors (TAs) are increasingly using spam emails and phishing websites to trick users into downloading malware such as Stealer and Remote Access Trojan (RAT) to infect users’ machines and steal sensitive information.</p> <p>Cyble Research & Intelligence Labs (CRIL) is actively monitoring various stealer malware and publishing blogs about them to inform and educate its readers.</p> <p>Recently, we came across a new strain of malware called “Rhadamanthys Stealer.” This stealer variant is active, and the TA behind the malware stealer is selling this under the Malware as a Service (MaaS) model.</p> <p>Rhadamanthys stealer spreads by using Google Ads that redirect the user to phishing websites that mimic popular software such as Zoom, AnyDesk, Notepad++, Bluestacks, etc. It can also spread via spam email containing an attachment for delivering the malicious payload.</p> <p>Phishing Sites</p> <p>The TAs behind this campaign also created a highly convincing phishing webpage impersonating legitimate websites to trick users into downloading the stealer malware, which carries out malicious activities. The link to these phishing websites spreads through Google ads. We have observed several phishing domains created to spread this malware. Some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• bluestacks-install[.]com• zoomus-install[.]com

- *install-zoom[.]com*
- *install-anydesk[.]com*
- *install-anydeslk[.]com*
- *zoom-meetings-install[.]com*
- *zoom-meetings-download[.]com*
- *anydeslk-download[.]com*
- *zoomvideo-install[.]com*
- *zoom-video-install[.]com*
- *istaller-zoom[.]com*
- *noteepad.hasankahrimanoglu[.]com[.]tr*

The phishing websites further downloads an installer file disguised as a legitimate installer downloading the respective applications. When installing the respective application, it also silently installs the stealer malware without the user's knowledge.

While investigating this malware, we observed that a steganography image was downloaded from the remote server. We suspect the shellcode decrypts the steganography image to get the actual Rhadamanthys payload. The memory of rundll32.exe contains all the malicious code responsible for stealer activities.

The Rhadamanthys stealer now starts collecting system information by executing a series of Windows Management Instrumentation (WMI) queries. The collected information includes the computer name, username, OS version, RAM, CPU information, HWID, time zone, user and keyboard language, and others.

After gathering system details, the malware queries the directories of the installed browsers on the victim's machine and searches for browser-related files such as browsing history, bookmarks, cookies, auto-fills, login credentials, etc. It targets different browsers such as Brave, Edge, Chrome, Firefox, Opera Software, Sleipnir5, Pale Moon, CocCoc, etc.

This stealer malware is also designed to target various crypto wallets and collects information from them. While the malware can target a wide range of crypto wallets, the observed stealer samples were found to have specific functionality to target the following crypto wallets:

- *Armory*
- *Binance*
- *Bitcoin*
- *Bytecoin*
- *Electron*
- *Qtum-Electrum*
- *Solar wallet*
- *WalletWasabi*
- *Zap*
- *Zecwallet Lite*
- *Zcash*

The stealer also targets various applications such as FTP clients (CoreFTP, WinSCP), email clients (Foxmail, Thunderbird, Outlook, TrulyMail, GmailNotifierPro), File managers (Total commanders), password managers (RoboForm, KeePass), VPN services (NordVPN, ProtonVPN, Windscribe VPN, OpenVPN), messaging applications (Tox, Discord, Telegram) and others. Additionally, it captures screenshots of the victim's machine using the *BitBlt()* API function. Finally, it sends all the collected stolen information to the attacker's C&C server.

Conclusion

Information stealers are malicious software used to gain unauthorized access to corporate networks, which has become a serious concern. Threat Actors use various techniques to deploy their malicious payloads into the victim's system. In this case, we observed that the TAs used spam email and phishing websites to deliver the Rhadamanthys Stealer, designed to steal sensitive information from the victim's machine.

Additionally, it was also noticed that the malware spreads via Google Ads. It is crucial for users to exercise caution when receiving spam emails or to visit phishing websites and to verify the source before downloading any applications.

Cyble Research and Intelligence Labs will continue monitoring the new malware strains in the wild and update blogs with actionable intelligence to protect users from such notorious attacks.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Pro-Russia hacktivist group targets NATO
SOURCE	https://www.sentinelone.com/labs/noname05716-the-pro-russian-hacktivist-group-targeting-nato/
GIST	<p>Executive Summary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pro-Russia hacktivist group NoName057(16) is conducting a campaign of DDoS attacks on Ukraine and NATO organizations that began in the early days of the war in Ukraine. Targets have included government organizations and critical infrastructure.• NoName057(16) was responsible for disrupting services across the financial sector of Denmark this week. Other recent attacks include organizations and businesses across Poland, Lithuania and others.• On January 11th, we observed NoName057(16) begin targeting 2023 Czech presidential election candidates' websites.• SentinelLabs has identified how the group operates over public Telegram channels, a volunteer-fueled DDoS payment program, a multi-OS supported toolkit, and GitHub. <p>What is NoName057(16)</p> <p>NoName057(16), also known as NoName05716, 05716nm or Nnm05716, is a relatively underreported hacktivist group supporting Russia since March 2022, alongside Killnet and other pro-Russian groups. In December 2022, the group was responsible for disrupting the Polish government website. As noted by the Polish government, the incident was in response to the Sejm of the Republic of Poland officially recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism in mid December 2022. More recently, the group targeted the Danish financial sector, impacting leading financial institutions as reported by Reuters.</p> <p>Motivations and Objectives</p> <p>The NoName057(16) group is primarily focused on disrupting websites important to nations critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks act as the method to conduct such disruption efforts.</p> <p>Initial attacks focused on Ukrainian news websites, while later shifting to NATO associated targets. For example, the first disruption the group claimed responsibility for were the March 2022 DDoS attacks on Ukraine news and media websites Zaxid, Fakty UA, and others. Overall the motivations center around silencing what the group deems to be anti-Russian.</p> <p>Operating Methods – Telegram Channel</p> <p>NoName057(16) operate through Telegram to claim responsibility for their attacks, mock targets, make threats, and generally justify their actions as a group. Interestingly, NoName057(16) makes attempts to teach their followers through educational content such as explaining basic industry jargon and attack concepts.</p> <p>With an average of six posts per day, the overall engagement of NoName057(16)'s Telegram efforts has slowly declined over time. Peak viewership of their posts occurred in July 2022, when they reached approximately 14,000 readers with nearly 100% engagement rate. Today, daily average reach is roughly 2-3,000 and engagement in the range of 10-20%, signifying that the group is becoming less relevant to their followers and to Telegram users as a whole. This may be explained in part by the fact that many similar hacktivist groups exist, have gained more attention, and are often more impactful in their objectives.</p> <p>Evidence from NoName057(16)'s Telegram channel indicates that the group values the recognition their attacks achieve through being referenced online including in Wikipedia articles. The channel also posts</p>

pro-Russian memes, motivational posts, and general status updates around the holidays. The observed Telegram activity makes it clear that the group considers itself a top tier Russian threat actor when in reality the impact of their DDoS attacks is short-lived disruption with little to no wider consequence.

Tool Hosting on GitHub

The group has also made use of GitHub to host a variety of illicit activity. This includes using [GitHub Pages](#) for freely hosting their DDoS tool website `dddosia.github[.]io`, and the associated GitHub repositories for hosting the latest version of their tools as advertised in the Telegram channel. Two GitHub profiles of interest are `dddosia` and `kintechi341`. Early commits to the `ddos_config` repo were made in the name of “Роман Омелеченко”.

We reported the abuse of these services to the GitHub Trust & Safety team, who quickly took action as a violation of GitHub’s Terms of Service.

Network

The C2 services are primarily hosted through Neterra, the Bulgarian telecommunications organization, while also making use of No-IP Dynamic DNS services. The current C2 is `zig35m48zur14nel40[.]myftp.org` at `31.13.195.87`. This server is active as of this release.

Targets

Throughout the life of the group, NoName057(16) has focused on targeting Ukraine and NATO member countries. Organizations targeted are commonly critical infrastructure sectors whose operations are vital to the target nation.

Target selection shifts according to current political events. As previously noted, [the Polish government was a December target](#) following the Sejm of the Republic of Poland officially recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism in mid December 2022. At the start of January 2023, a large focus was placed on targeting Lithuanian organizations, primarily in the cargo and shipping sectors. Most recently the actor began focusing on targeting leading Danish financial institutions including Danske Bank, Danmarks Nationalbank, and others [reported in the media this week](#).

On January 11th 2023, we observed the actor begin targeting websites owned by multiple 2023 Czech presidential election candidates. The election is occurring on January 13th and 14th 2023, so timing of the disruption efforts can not be ignored. Specific targets include domains for candidates Pavel Fischer, Marek Hilšer, Jaroslav Bašta, General Petr Pavel, and Danuše Nerudová. Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic website was also targeted at the same time. We have notified Czech CERT upon discovery of the new target list.

Conclusion

NoName057(16) is yet another hacktivist group to emerge following the war in Ukraine. While not technically sophisticated, they can have an impact on service availability— even when generally short lived. What this group represents is an increased interest in volunteer-fueled attacks, while now adding in payments to its most impactful contributors. We expect such groups to continue to thrive in today’s highly contentious political climate.

We would like to thank GitHub’s Trust & Safety team for a quick response following our abuse notification. The actors’ accounts and pages are no longer online.

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Terrorism, Extremism

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HEADLINE	01/12 US: \$10M reward Kenya 2019 attack planner
SOURCE	https://www.brusselstimes.com/351474/us-offering-up-to-10-million-for-information-on-mastermind-behind-attack-on-hotel-in-kenya

GIST	<p>The United States has announced that it is offering up to \$10 million for information leading to the arrest of a man believed to be the “terrorist mastermind” behind a 2019 attack on a hotel in Kenya that caused the death of 21 people, including an American.</p> <p>The U.S. is looking for Mohamoud Abdi Aden, whom it considers a leader of al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based Islamist group that has carried out several bloody attacks in neighbouring Kenya.</p> <p>The group claimed responsibility for the 15 January 2019 attack on the posh DusitD2 hotel in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. Twenty-one people were killed during the siege of the hotel, which lasted about 20 hours. Kenyan authorities indicated at the time that all the attackers were killed.</p> <p>U.S. Ambassador to Kenya Meg Whitman told reporters in Nairobi that Mohamoud Abdi Aden was part of the cell that planned the attack on the DusitD2 hotel. She added that the US is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the arrest of Aden, believed to be a Kenyan national, and others involved in the siege of the hotel.</p> <p>Kenyan intelligence chief Amin Mohamed Ibrahim called Aden the “terrorist mastermind” of the attack. Al-Shabaab has carried out several attacks in Kenya since the country sent its army into Somalia in October 2011 to fight the radical Islamist group.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 US: \$10M for info Hezbollah financiers
SOURCE	https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17233-u-s-offers-10-million-for-information-on-hezbollah-financiers-in-guinea
GIST	<p>The U.S. is offering up to US\$10 million for information on Hezbollah’s financial networks in the West African country of Guinea associated with the activities of two local tycoons of Lebanese origin who were sanctioned by the Treasury in March last year.</p> <p>Hezbollah is an Iran-backed Shia militant group and political party in Lebanon, which has previously called for the annihilation of Israel and has been designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and most Arab countries.</p> <p>West Africa, with its sizeable Lebanese population and critically weak rule of law, has earned notoriety as a Hezbollah money laundering hotspot.</p> <p>The two tycoons, Ibrahim Taher and Ali Saade, were in particular accused of using their contacts in the Guinean regime to facilitate political support for Hezbollah’s operations and of transferring money from Guinea for the group.</p> <p>In 2020, they were to be involved in flying a large amount of cash on a special flight from Guinea to Lebanon, which was presented as COVID-19 relief but was suspected to have ended up in the hands of Hezbollah.</p> <p>Saade allegedly held the post of Honorary Consul of Lebanon in Ivory Coast and Taher was Honorary Consul of Lebanon in Guinea, which was to allow them to travel in and out of the country with minimal scrutiny.</p> <p>It is not fully clear whether the Treasury sanctions from March had any impact on the activities of the duo. A few days after the sanction announcement, Guinea claimed to have seized their assets. But Saade later said that Guinea’s President Mamady Doumbouya gave him a personal assurance that he should not fear the state.</p> <p>In Shia-dominated southern Lebanon, Hezbollah effectively operates as a state within a state, providing comprehensive social services and a healthcare system.</p>

	To sustain its operations, Hezbollah relies heavily on financial support from Iran, donations from supporters and legitimate businesses but was also reported to derive significant revenues from drug trafficking, goods smuggling and other illicit activities.
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HEADLINE	01/12 ADL: hate, extremism online games worsen
SOURCE	https://www.wpxi.com/news/local/adl-reports-increase-hate-extremism-online-games-gaming-industry-responds/JBOB5EVHZNBVRMW444XGIVF4RY/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON D.C. — According to a recent report from the Anti-Defamation league, hate and extremism in online games has worsened since last year.</p> <p>The report says four out of five adults experienced harassment in online multiplayer games and white supremacy is also on the rise. The document shows the exposure to it has more than doubled from 2021 to 2022.</p> <p>Jonathan Smith, who fell in love with gaming as a kid, has noticed changes in some of the things he hears online.</p> <p>“The n-word or ‘your mom’s a “B,”’ or they’ll tell you ‘you’re a “B”’ or they say a whole bunch of obscene sexual gestures,” he described.</p> <p>We went over the ADL report with Smith.</p> <p>“That’s crazy, wow,” he reacted. “That’s very unfortunate.”</p> <p>“We’ve seen year over year that things are getting worse,” said Daniel Kelley, who focuses on how the ADL is fighting hate online.</p> <p>He believes the gaming companies need to push back harder against this behavior.</p> <p>“Platforms where there is not robust moderation become places where that facilitate hate, harassment and extremism,” he said. “There isn’t the same level of care taken into crafting policies, to enforcing policies, to having teams dedicated to this.”</p> <p>But the Entertainment Software Association said the industry goes “to great lengths” to create “a healthy, safe and inclusive environment.” a statement points to “clear codes of conduct that set expectations for acceptable behavior,” “serious consequences” for those “who engage in harmful behaviors” and ways players can report any of this.</p> <p>In the meantime, Jonathan and his friends have worked to create the DC Gaming Group, which is a place where gaming brings people together.</p> <p>“We wanted to give a place, safe space, not safe space, but safe place or as all-inclusive group setting where people can just come and enjoy themselves and have fun,” Smith said.</p> <p><u>FULL STATEMENT FROM ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION:</u></p> <p><i>As an entertainment industry, we strive to create fun and engaging experiences for all players and go to great lengths to ensure that our player communities can be enjoyed in a healthy, safe and inclusive environment. We do not tolerate actions by bad actors seeking to use our games as a platform to propagate inappropriate messages.</i></p> <p><i>The industry has clear codes of conduct that set expectations for acceptable behavior, and players who engage in harmful behaviors, such as hate speech or calls for violence, face serious consequences, including having their accounts terminated and, or, being referred to law enforcement, as warranted. The industry also encourages players to report disruptive content and behavior when they see it, which is one</i></p>

of the most effective tools in curbing bad actors. Advanced technologies, expert human moderators and tools that empower parents and players to manage gameplay also contribute to ensuring safer and more positive experiences for all players.

We are continually evaluating and improving our processes and policies, but what remains unchanged is our goal to create positive, safe and inclusive spaces for everyone.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Domestic extremists killed 13 in 2021
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/domestic-extremists-killed-13-2021-us-intelligence-assessment/story?id=96386912
GIST	<p>Domestic extremists are "are often radicalized online and look to conduct attacks with easily accessible weapons," an unclassified version of report done by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence found.</p> <p>The version of the congressionally mandated report, sent to both the Senate and House intelligence committees in October, was made public late last week by the ODNI.</p> <p>A bulletin from June 2022 and attached to the report says the domestic violent extremist landscape in the United States is "evolving" and centers around "ideological and sociopolitical" grievances which pose a "sustained threat of violence" to the American public.</p> <p>Domestic violent extremists killed 13 people in 2021, carrying out "at least" four lethal attacks, according to the bulletin by the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the National Counter Terrorism Center -- the same number as in 2020.</p> <p>"Domestic violent extremists represent one of the most persistent threats to the United States today," the report says, echoing much of what the administration has been saying since President Joe Biden took office.</p> <p>John Cohen, the former acting undersecretary for intelligence and analysis at DHS said the numbers are part of a "disturbingly high level of violence."</p> <p>It's "not just lethal attacks but targeted mass casualty attacks and acts of targeted violence by individuals who are inspired by violent extremist ideological beliefs," Cohen, now an ABC News contributor, said.</p> <p>Since 2019 however, the government has used five categories to classify domestic extremism, among them anti-government violence and anti-abortion violence.</p> <p>"The FBI recognizes a DT incident as an ideologically-driven criminal act, including threats made to or acts of violence against specific victims, in furtherance of a domestic political and/or social goal," the report says.</p> <p>As stated previously by FBI Director Christopher Wray, the FBI was conducting 2,700 domestic terrorism investigations, 38% of those focused on anti-government extremists, followed by 31% of them focusing on civil unrest.</p> <p>The report notes these could be inflated due to the high number of Jan. 6 investigations.</p> <p>The bulletin attached to the report says anti-government violent extremists could conduct "sporadic attacks on critical infrastructure and federal, state and local facilities, as well as violent physical assaults against their perceived ideological opponents."</p> <p>The FBI has been the subject of scrutiny from congressional Republicans who have alleged the the past, that the FBI targets people on the right and unfairly opens investigations against them.</p>

	<p>"There are no differences in how the FBI reviews and prioritizes DT and IT threats, and each threat issue is reviewed independently; however, the threat band dictates priorities within these programs.," the report says.</p> <p>The FBI says they've received more than 8,700 domestic extremist criminal referrals in 2021.</p> <p>Reporting DVE incident is not mandatory, but the FBI makes "every effort" to document lethal and non-lethal DVE incidents, the report says.</p>
Return to Top	<p>Click on link to view report: 2022 10 FBI-DHS Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism PDF United States Department Of Homeland Security American Government (scribd.com)</p>

HEADLINE	01/12 CT man guilty plea: tried to join ISIS
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/connecticut-man-pleads-guilty-trying-230734863.html
GIST	<p>A Connecticut man pleaded guilty on Thursday to attempting to travel to the Middle East to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), according to the U.S. Attorney for the District of Connecticut.</p> <p>Kevin Iman McCormick, 29, was arrested in October 2019 at a private airport in Connecticut, where he was allegedly tried to board a flight to Canada and then to Amman, Jordan.</p> <p>In the months leading up that arrest, McCormick pledged his allegiance to ISIS and its then-leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.</p> <p>"I gotta fight bro, because those people, Abu Masa and ISIL, they fought for me bro, I know it, I can feel it, in my heart. So it's my time to fight... It just is what it is bro, it's just my – it's just my time to go bro," McCormick said in one conversation in October 2019, according to prosecutors.</p> <p>McCormick later said that he wants to travel to Syria, or "whatever place I can get there the fastest, the quickest, the easiest, and where I can have a rifle and I can have some people."</p> <p>"I need Islamic law, I need, that's what I need, because if I have these things, it's gonna to be very hard to kill me," McCormick said, according to prosecutors.</p> <p>Before his arrest on Oct. 19, 2019, McCormick attempted to board another flight from Connecticut to Jamaica and then Syria, but was stopped by the Department of Homeland Security.</p> <p>McCormick faces up to 20 years in prison when he is sentenced on April 6.</p> <p>An attorney from the federal public defender's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/12 Lawmakers sidestep Public Records Act
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/politics/2023/01/some-wa-lawmakers-are-sidestepping-states-public-records-act
GIST	<p>In 2019, the state Supreme Court ruled that lawmakers had been violating Washington's Public Records Act for years by unlawfully withholding disclosable documents, such as lawmaker calendars and emails.</p>

But what seemed to be settled law at the time remains a point of contention between legislators and the public, and the journalists working on their behalf.

The Supreme Court ruling in *Associated Press et al. v. Washington State Legislature et al.* – which came after a coalition of media organizations sued – essentially found that for years, legislators had [unlawfully claimed themselves exempt from the 1972 voter-approved transparency law](#).

The Public Records Act requires city councils and police departments, county commissions and sheriffs, state agencies and elected officials to release documents like calendars, memos, phone records, emails and text messages. It's the law that allows anyone to go and read the emails of Attorney General Bob Ferguson, Gov. Jay Inslee and other statewide elected officials.

But even the highest court in the state can't stop legislators from hiding documents they don't want to show the public.

Over the past year, lawmakers have begun asserting what they call "legislative privilege" to again withhold or redact documents like emails. The phenomenon [was first reported by McClatchy](#), which owns the Tacoma News Tribune and The Olympian.

At an annual legislative preview last week, legislative leaders generally defended the practice, with some arguing that they have a constitutional right to it.

"Legislative privilege is an exception from public records that's actually grounded in the constitution, not in statute," said Rep. Laurie Jenkins, the Democratic House speaker.

She contended that each individual legislator can assert a privilege to withhold documents, meaning an email between two lawmakers might be considered exempt from disclosure by one member and a public record by the other member.

Staff attorneys for the House of Representatives searched more than 26,000 records for 2022 from both Democrats and Republicans, according to a spokesperson for Jenkins. That review found 24 requests with redactions for legislative privilege.

Advocates for open government, as well as the attorney involved in the 2019 *Associated Press* lawsuit, however, have said they don't believe an exemption exists.

On Monday, public records advocate Arthur West filed a complaint against the Legislature and Democratic and Republican leaders in Thurston County Superior Court. West's lawsuit alleges, among other things, that lawmakers are violating the 2019 court ruling.

Additionally, lawmakers could face further penalties in the 2019 public records case – part of which is still being resolved in that same Thurston County court – for withholding the new records, according to Michele Earl-Hubbard of Allied Law Group.

In an interview, Earl-Hubbard, the attorney for the media organizations on that case, said Thurston County Superior Court Judge Chris Lanese could potentially grant penalties against lawmakers for their latest moves.

"That can clearly come back and bite them in a penalty motion," said Earl-Hubbard, a board member of the Washington Coalition for Open Government, who was speaking for herself. Such a motion, she said, is "to deter future action, to make other agencies comply."

"And to me, the Legislature and legislators have illustrated they have not yet gotten the message," she said.

House Chief Clerk Bernard Dean declined to comment on those cases, writing in an email that he hadn't yet seen the complaint by West, and that the House generally does not comment on litigation. He added that legislative privilege is considered a concept in at least 43 other states.

In an email, Secretary of the Senate Sarah Bannister [cited a 2006 Snohomish County Superior Court ruling](#) that the Legislature believes justifies the new practice.

Legislative attorneys are using that decision, known as *Washington State Farm Bureau v. Gregoire*, "when determining whether or not evoking legislative privilege is appropriate," according to Bannister.

"Now obviously a higher court has not weighed in on legislative privilege in this state, but courts in many other states have appellate cases that are consistent with the attached opinion," Bannister wrote. "If at some point an appellate court in this state has a different interpretation we will, of course, follow it, but for now, this is the only comprehensive guidance we have from any court on this topic."

A historic lack of transparency

For years, Washington lawmakers claimed they were exempt from the state's 1972 [voter-approved statute](#) requiring government and elected officials to disclose swath of documents, from emails and memos to official calendars.

A coalition of news organizations sued the Legislature to challenge that exemption, and that case, *Associated Press et al.*, resulted in a partial victory in 2019. The state Supreme Court found that lawmakers' offices were subject to disclosure, but the House and the Senate as institutions were not.

Lawmakers are now withholding records by claiming Article II, Section 17 of the state Constitution. [Titled "Freedom of Debate,"](#) it is a one-sentence provision which reads: "No member of the legislature shall be liable in any civil action or criminal prosecution whatever, for words spoken in debate."

The denials also cite a 2013 state Supreme Court ruling – [Gregoire v. Freedom Foundation](#) – that allowed Washington's governors to assert an executive privilege to shield records from disclosure. In her view, Earl-Hubbard said that neither of those citations would give them the power to shield records.

"They're citing completely inapplicable laws that do not apply to the records they're citing," she said.

"I was the lawyer who handled the *Gregoire* case and the Freedom Foundation, and it was all about the idea, about the executive privilege case at the federal level," added Earl-Hubbard. "And can that privilege apply to a governor as a chief executive. It was a very, very specific argument for a chief executive."

Gov. Jay Inslee himself vowed long ago not to invoke executive privilege given to him by the court decision. The governor later vetoed a bill by the Legislature exempting itself from the Public Records Act before the legal challenge by news organizations reached the state Supreme Court.

Asked about his decision at the legislative preview, the governor called transparency an "important issue" and encouraged the lawmakers to be transparent.

"We have, in the executive branch, demonstrated that we can be effective in leading the state while also being as transparent as possible," Inslee said, adding: "I hope legislators can achieve the same result, I do think it's important."

In his response during the legislative preview, House Minority Leader J.T. Wilcox, R-Yelm, was skeptical of the concept. He has searched through his own records in recent years, Wilcox said, as they get requested for public disclosure.

“It can be a little arduous sometimes,” said Wilcox. “But it’s never once occurred to me that, ‘Oh, there must be some reason I can find that I shouldn’t turn this over if it is responsive to the request.’”

“And so the idea that things that are difficult can be concealed, seems counter to what ... the whole PRA debate was all about a few years ago,” Wilcox added.

Public’s need to know

The return toward secrecy is worrying to advocates of open government.

“The public needs to know what its government is doing,” said George Erb, secretary of the Washington Coalition for Open Government. “In our view, this is just the Legislature's latest attempt to rewrite itself out of the state's transparency laws.”

Jason Mercier of the Washington Policy Center has spent years filing public disclosure requests. He’s now among those who have received redacted records claiming legislative privilege. After so many battles over public disclosure, the latest revelations left him “numb.”

“When I got the redactions, I was like, there they go again,” said Mercier.

Among the documents Mercier has requested are those concerning internal discussions about the tax on capital gains [passed by the Legislature in 2021](#). Democrats have described it as an excise tax, and that’s an important distinction in a state where a state income tax was long ago found unconstitutional. The state Supreme Court later this month will hear arguments to a legal challenge on whether the capital gains tax is constitutional.

It’s valuable for the public to see how lawmakers talk about issues behind closed doors, Mercier said, to better understand where they’re coming from. [Previous records obtained by Mercier](#) show at least one lawmaker acknowledging that the capital gains tax was expected to be challenged before the state Supreme Court.

“I wanted to know what are they telling themselves, what do they think they know,” he said.

Earl-Hubbard said she thinks the legal advice given to lawmakers to justify legislative privilege “is completely wrong.”

“And it looks like they're just trying to find another excuse to hide their actions from the public,” she added.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Climate change worsens atmospheric rivers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2023/01/12/climate-change-atmospheric-rivers-rain/
GIST	<p>In recent weeks, a slew of storms has slammed California, bringing torrential rains and deadly flooding. Storms are typical in the winter, including those associated with atmospheric rivers, or long and wide plumes of water vapor flowing from the tropics. But as Earth warms, climate scientists warn these atmospheric river events may be amplified, bringing even more destruction.</p> <p>In other words, the recent events could be just a modest preview of what’s to come in warmer years ahead. The impact of these storms is a paradox. Atmospheric rivers generally provide precipitation critical to a region’s water cycle. These massive rivers, which sometimes carry 15 times the water volume of the Mississippi River, deliver half of the western United States’ total precipitation in less than 15 total days.</p> <p>But too much rain in a short amount of time can have devastating effects on communities. Atmospheric rivers account for nearly 90 percent of California’s flood damage. Infrastructure has been destroyed and more than a dozen people have been killed by the storms of the past two weeks.</p>

To help water managers and local authorities better prepare for future events, researchers are studying how a warmer world will influence the precipitation, intensity, location and societal effects of atmospheric rivers. In some aspects, climate change is already having detrimental effects on the systems.

Here are four ways increased temperatures affect atmospheric rivers in the western United States.

Heavier rainfall

Perhaps one of the most well-understood aspects of climate change is its effect on rain. In a warmer atmosphere, evaporation rates increase and transform more liquid water molecules to a vapor state in the air. In fact, the atmosphere can hold about 7 percent more water for every 1-degree Celsius (1.8-degree Fahrenheit) increase. This moisture-laden air can drop heavier amounts of rainfall at one time, increasing the intensity of rain events.

Earth's atmosphere has warmed about 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times, and researchers have already observed heavier rain in [storms](#), [hurricanes](#), [daily precipitation](#) — and now in atmospheric rivers.

In a [recent study](#), researchers found climate change increased the amount of rainfall from two atmospheric rivers in February 2017, which [notably damaged](#) Oroville Dam, California's second-largest dam, and prompted the evacuation of 188,000 people. The atmospheric rivers produced about 11 and 15 percent more rain because of warming brought on by fossil fuel burning. If the same events were to take place in an even warmer world — as projected by the end of the 21st century — the researchers found rainfall quantities would have been 20 and 60 percent higher.

Scientists will need to conduct a similar in-depth analysis of the current atmospheric activity to determine how human-caused climate change has played a part, but researchers say they wouldn't be surprised to see heightened rainfall because of climate change. Other studies modeling future atmospheric rivers show rainfall will undoubtedly increase — up to [40 percent more](#) — in a warming world.

“We're more than likely going to see more rain associated with atmospheric rivers and more precipitation in general,” said Allison Michaelis, an atmospheric researcher at Northern Illinois University and lead author of the recent study.

She added that some atmospheric rivers may be “more susceptible to the environmental changes associated with climate change” and show larger changes than others.

More intense, costlier destruction

Atmospheric rivers can be a bane or boon to local communities. Smaller events can help replenish water reserves, but larger or persistent systems can cause millions to billions of dollars in flood damage. Studies show that in a warmer world, atmospheric rivers will trend more harmful than beneficial.

According to [recent research](#), the number of atmospheric rivers that are “mostly or primarily hazardous” to water resource management will increase in intensity, occur in closer succession and [drop more rainfall](#) in a season. In fact, researchers [estimate](#) that atmospheric rivers in the western United States will become 15 percent larger in size and last six hours longer for every 1-degree Celsius (or 1.8-degree Fahrenheit) spike.

These more intense atmospheric rivers will also become more frequent. In a world without human-induced climate change such as during the pre-industrial era, intense atmospheric rivers occur about 2 percent of the time in a season. At 3 degrees of warming, they could make up more than 8 percent of all atmospheric rivers in a season.

The study authors found that in a situation where the world hits 3 degrees Celsius of warming, more intense events could raise flood damage costs from \$1 billion to about \$3 billion by the end of the century.

“That's a subtle but important uptick in those [most intense] events along the coast of the western U.S.,” said Alan Rhoades, lead author of the study and research scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National

Laboratory. “We found that translates to roughly \$1 billion in potential flood insurance damage for every Celsius degree of warming.”

Rhoades said there is still time to keep warming below 3 degrees Celsius. If Earth’s temperature stays between 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius of warming, the most intense atmospheric rivers could occur 4 to 5 percent of the time instead of 8.

Less snowpack

Atmospheric rivers play a critical role in supplying mountain snowpack, which serves as an important source of freshwater as it melts in the spring and summer. Some [research shows](#) the weather systems provide about a quarter of the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada. Yet as temperatures rise, snowfall is decreasing.

[Studies](#) have already shown atmospheric rivers are delivering less snow in the northern Sierra Nevada, instead falling as rain because of Earth’s excess warmth. Some of the rain can run off into rivers and cause flooding. In some cases, the rain can also land on top of snow, accelerating melt. In February 2017, rain from atmospheric rivers fell atop snow, leading to runoff that damaged the main and emergency spillways of the [Oroville Dam](#).

“The real risk here is California’s whole infrastructure was built with what we understood of the snowpack, meaning a natural reservoir through the whole winter,” said Anna Wilson, who studies atmospheric rivers at Scripps Institution of Oceanography. “Now we’re getting into situations where we’re getting more rain throughout the year. Sometimes they have rain on top of snow.”

[Researchers project](#) such rain events will multiply across the western United States. Rain-on-snow events are expected to increase at higher elevations, raising the flood risk most notably in the Sierra Nevada, Colorado River headwaters and the Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Wilson and other scientists are working to improve forecasts of atmospheric rivers, which could better inform water managers on impending heavy rain events. In response, she said water managers could open reservoirs beforehand, helping to prevent flooding during an atmospheric river event.

Potential shifts in location

Climate change may also alter where atmospheric rivers touch down, although researchers are still investigating how.

Atmospheric rivers are steered by the low-level jet stream, said Christine Shields, a climate scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. A warmer climate, however, is expected to push the jet stream toward the equator. [Shields and her colleagues](#) found that such a shift would bring more atmospheric river events and higher rainfall rates to Southern California in the winter. Although other scientists, like Wilson, said there’s not yet a consensus on how or if atmospheric rivers will change in latitude.

Shields said it’s still an “open question” if climate change has already changed the landfall location of atmospheric rivers along the West Coast.

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HEADLINE	01/13 India fights pollution by investing in PR
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/13/india-smog-air-pollution/
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI — In late 2020, the leader of Delhi’s government unveiled a new tool developed by university researchers to fight the Indian capital’s notorious air pollution.</p> <p>Standing before a horde of cameras, New Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal held a hose and squirted a chemical spray that he said could decompose the residue of harvested crops, thus eliminating the need for farmers to burn this stubble every winter and spew toxic emissions into the air.</p>

“This should be the last year we have to suffer this smoke,” Kejriwal [declared](#), as the government [released](#) a [slew](#) of [Facebook and YouTube videos](#) trumpeting the spray.

More than two years on, the Delhi government, led by Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), has spent about \$4,300 manufacturing the spray — and \$2.8 million publicizing it — according to [official documents](#) released in the city’s assembly. Meanwhile, air pollution continues to plague the Indian capital, with pollutant levels this month almost 30 times higher than the World Health Organization’s safe limit.

The spray is an example of how Indian officials have grappled with one of the most pressing problems facing northern India by introducing new pollution-fighting efforts with highly visible marketing campaigns and barely visible results.

“The bio-decomposer is not a silver bullet, [and] you don’t need a mass public awareness campaign on this,” said Aarti Khosla, director of a climate consultancy, Climate Trends. “We are living in a marketing era.”

Last year, the AAP publicized an 80-foot-tall smog tower in the center of Delhi that cost \$2.3 million to build and \$700,000 to advertise, according to official [documents](#) released in the city’s assembly. The tower, which consists of 40 large fans blowing air through filters, has a looming presence in central Delhi but a limited effect on air quality, [according to scientific research](#). Nonetheless, a second one was installed in the city.

Officials in the capital have also touted other new tools to tackle air pollution, including more than 350 anti-smog guns and 521 water sprinklers, that likewise have limited efficacy, climate experts say.

With Delhi’s poor winter air giving rise to an epidemic of hacking coughs, wheezing and other respiratory ailments, political parties are under mounting pressure to take action and are resorting to superficial fixes that often fail to bring about actual change, environmentalists and political observers say.

Siddharth Singh, a policy analyst and the author of the book “[The Great Smog of India](#),” said he began seeing advertisements about anti-air-pollution measures about three years ago, with bio-decomposers among the first examples. He saw the AAP, which has governed Delhi since 2015, start placing pollution at the center of its election manifestos in 2019, he said. While Singh said the bio-decomposer is theoretically useful, he doesn’t anticipate a substantial impact on air quality.

“It’s like trying to sell a drop of water to someone in the desert,” said Singh, who also criticized the massive smog towers as wasteful. “They are forced to do these gimmicks because there is no overarching effort to address the problem. They need to seem to be doing something because clearly, people are angry.”

Reena Gupta, an adviser to New Delhi’s environment minister and the AAP’s think tank, said the government has not been responding to voter pressure, which she called minimal. In the case of the bio-decomposer, she argued, the government needed to spend money to educate farmers about the usefulness of the new spray.

“We are trying to create that awareness in our constituencies that we are environmentally conscious and we are working for you,” Gupta said in an interview. “Advertising is the only way to tell the people what we are doing.”

The AAP isn’t alone. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which controls the national government and has competed against the AAP in recent elections, has also sought to embellish its pollution-fighting credentials with dubious methods, according to examples provided by experts and consultants who have worked with the government in various capacities.

In one instance last year, officials in neighboring Uttar Pradesh state, governed by the BJP, ordered maintenance companies to relocate two air pollution monitoring devices to less-polluted parts of its cities, said two people knowledgeable about the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of damaging relationships with the government.

“Moving sensors and not being able to target the really large sources [of pollution] — you are just doing cosmetic stuff,” said one of the people, a consultant whose team worked on Uttar Pradesh’s pollution strategy.

Local officers with the state’s pollution control boards confirmed that monitors were moved in 2022 but gave differing explanations. Vijay, a regional officer in Baghpat district who only goes by a first name, said the move was because of insufficient electricity. Vikas Mishra, the regional officer for Moradabad district, said a monitor was moved because a new development in that area had its own monitors.

Experts say the country’s air pollution can only be addressed effectively if it is tackled across a vast area of northern India known as the Gangetic plain, but it is governed by different parties and governments that do not cooperate. Every year, BJP leaders criticize the AAP for failing to bring down skyrocketing air particle readings, while the AAP has countered that national officials have blocked its measures and provided no solutions in the states that the BJP controls.

After the AAP banned Delhi residents from celebrating the Diwali holiday with firecrackers, the BJP accused the AAP last year of being “anti-Hindu.” The AAP retorted that it was focused on saving lives.

Policy experts say the appearance of action, rather than action itself, is often what gets votes.

In 2016, India’s Health Ministry introduced a program to distribute free gas cylinders to the poor in an effort to phase out open-air stoves, which release noxious fumes. But officials in charge didn’t ensure that the users could afford refills, according to a researcher who worked with the program and who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of damaging relationships with the government.

“For those of us in this field, that was the single biggest air pollution mitigation and health improvement scheme that had been launched till date,” the researcher said. “But the performative aspect of it came out. ... And for votes, it worked. But you have all these empty cylinders lying there.”

The Petroleum Ministry disputed the claim at the time, saying there was a high volume of refill purchases. Since then, the government has announced a subsidy.

Bhargav Krishna, an air quality expert in Delhi, said the problem may be the government’s capacity to carry out programs rather than malicious intent. He applauded the significant funds that are now being allocated to tackle air pollution.

Ultimately, researchers say, any discussion about the air crisis is better than no discussion at all. “If an issue is not politicized, it will die a slow death,” said Singh, the policy analyst and author. “If you want something to remain in public consciousness, you want politicians to be saying stupid things about it, which includes frivolous ads.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Amid winter, Europe’s snowless ski resorts
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/12/skiing-climate-change-alps-snow/
GIST	<p>LES GETS, France — With children running around inflatable cactuses and sunburned mountain bikers racing under blue skies, this French village looked like an enviable summer holidays destination last week. The problem was that nobody here had asked for it.</p> <p>Not in the middle of winter, when this Alpine ski resort should have been covered by thick layers of snow, ice and even more snow.</p>

But instead of icicle-clad chalets, visitors to this village at an altitude of almost 4,000 feet encountered muddy paths and halted lifts in recent weeks, as [Europe's unusually warm winter](#) closed half of French slopes, forced the [cancellation of winter sports competitions](#) and left recreational skiers [clamoring for refunds](#). It may be a preview of what is to come in a warming world, researchers worry, with average temperatures rising two times as fast in parts of the Alps as elsewhere.

While some tourists in Les Gets were quick to adapt to the winter heat wave — renting bikes instead of skis, ordering cold beer instead of hot mulled wine — many locals struggled to suppress a creeping feeling that this could be the beginning of the end of skiing in their part of the Alps and life as they know it.

“This is more than ‘warming,’” said Fabrice Dumaine, 52, who was waxing a pair of skis in the rental shop he operates, near a vending machine that sells cheese for raclette, a traditional après-ski meal. “It’s usually minus-5 degrees [23 degrees Fahrenheit] here at this time, and now it’s 15 degrees [59 degrees Fahrenheit]. Even some summers are colder.”

In the snowless weeks this winter, Dumaine lost about a third of his usual business.

“What’s scary,” he said, “is the uncertainty.”

Many locals hope this year could still prove to be an outlier. Even in the 1960s, some recall, there were snow-free weeks in Les Gets. Here and in many other Alpine resorts, colder temperatures and snow finally returned over the past four days.

But researchers say the trend in resorts like Les Gets is clear. Within the next seven to 17 years, skiing will become impossible “in the medium-altitude mountains, and the snow cover will inexorably decrease in the highest parts of the mountain ranges,” said Magali Reghezza-Zitt, a French geographer. By some estimates, by the end of the century, snow may have declined between [30 percent and 70 percent in the Alps](#), affecting even resorts that have so far been safe.

The past weeks have been “an impressive example of how the average future could look like,” said Robert Steiger, a tourism researcher at the University of Innsbruck in Austria.

In towns across the Alps, recreational skiing carries a heavy cultural value and economic weight. Since resorts were massively scaled up in the 1960s and ’70s, winter sports have been essential to the region’s economy. Almost half a million permanent or seasonal jobs depend on it in France, which shares the Alps with seven other countries that rely on the mountains for revenue.

And so, many European resorts have treated the lack of snow in recent weeks as an existential crisis. They’ve deployed snow cannons to artificially freeze water droplets into snow crystals. Some villages loaded snow piles onto trucks. A Swiss resort even attempted to [fly in snow by helicopter](#). To the extent that any of it worked, it was only enough to cover narrow stretches that were soon featured in viral and at times dystopian videos on social media.

While artificial snow kept at least some of the slopes open in Les Gets last week, the runs were an unsatisfying experience for many. “Everyone is at the same bit of snow, and it’s really bad snow,” said Marius van Hasselt, 21, a Dutch visitor. Some of his friends headed home early.

At the same time, the frenzied efforts to keep business running at all costs are increasingly moving ski resorts into the center of a broader and particularly divisive climate debate: For how long should seemingly doomed economic sectors be allowed to continue in a warming world?

Activists celebrated when the Spanish government in 2021 banned parts of a small ski resort near Madrid from operating, citing in part a 25 percent decline in snowfall over the previous 50 years and an increasingly unjustifiable environmental footprint.

In the Alps, climate activists warn that the more frequent use of snow cannons will aggravate drought. Water is lost in the artificial snow-making process, as a result of evaporation, wind drift and other influences. And France, where some reservoirs dried up last summer, can't afford to have that water taken out of natural circulation, activists say.

Over the past weeks, snow cannons in at least five Alpine ski resorts were sabotaged, including La Clusaz, Les Gets and Switzerland's Verbier resort. "No skiing without snow," read a message sprayed onto a cannon in Les Gets, next to a symbol for the climate activism group Extinction Rebellion. (The group has denied responsibility.)

Instead of trying to fix the problem with artificial snow, "it is urgently necessary to start thinking about the ecological transition of this model," said Fiona Mille, president of environmental group Mountain Wilderness France. That could mean zip lines instead of ski lifts, summer toboggan tracks instead of winter sledding hills in low- or medium-altitude resorts.

In parts of the Alps, the end of skiing is not only near, activists argue. It is overdue.

La Clusaz Mayor Didier Thévenet said the resorts are being unfairly criticized, because it is easy to engage in "ski-bashing."

"In the minds of people, it's for the rich, we use water, we use energy. We've used cement mixers, we've built a lot. So, for them, we're wrong about everything," he said, sipping coffee in a small mountain cabin on the peak above his village, overlooking western Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc, where snow is still plentiful.

"Skiing stands for everything environmentalists don't like," he said.

Ski resort operators point to all the environmental practices they have adopted: reducing their use of polluting snow groomer fuel, and encouraging tourists to arrive on sleek high-speed trains instead of cars that clog the mountain roads.

"We're convinced that there is a path for a reasonable operation of ski areas in harmony with nature," said Laurent Reynaud, who represents France's association of ski areas.

Officials in La Clusaz acknowledge that they will need to expand their use of snow cannons to remain profitable in the coming years. But the village recently cited environmental concerns in rejecting a major hotel chain's lucrative offer to build a new resort. Officials have been working to develop a bigger summer tourism sector, while exploring the potential closure of ski slopes that are particularly vulnerable in warm winters.

"What we ask the public and the [environmental] associations is to give us time to work with elected officials, engineers, experts and consultants, to bring about this evolution of our economic model," said Jean-Philippe Monfort, head of the village's tourism office.

But there may be economic and technological limits to how much and how quickly villages like La Clusaz can adapt. Skiers spend far more on lift passes and equipment rentals than hikers contribute to the local economy.

"We will have less money, and we will probably lower our standard of living," Thévenet said.

Already, some of the economic pain is being felt.

Nicolas Chauvin, 23, one of tens of thousands of seasonal workers in French ski resorts, was supposed to start working as a waiter in La Clusaz in late November. But he had to rely on unemployment benefits during a no-snow delay, and when he finally arrived in the village on Saturday, rolling his suitcase over the snow-free road, he wasn't sure if the wait had been worth it.

“The cable car cabins are all empty,” he said, staring at the lift in front of him with disappointment.

Climate change has upended his life more than once over the past years. When he was working at a beach resort restaurant during the summer, record heat waves across Europe kept the majority of tables empty for weeks.

“I’m only 23 years old, but within the past 10 years, it has all completely changed,” he said. “We need to reinvent everything.”

For some resorts, it may be too late. Already, many smaller ski resorts struggle to “charge the price that would be necessary to run a profitable business,” said tourism researcher Steiger, meaning they have little financial leeway to invest in other areas.

Resorts may run up so much debt that they will eventually be forced to go out of business without having built viable long-term alternatives, researchers warn.

“A wasteland — whether touristic or industrial — is a wasteland,” Reghezza-Zitt said.

But where some see wastelands, others sense opportunities. On a remote La Clusaz hiking trail that in past winters was usually only accessible with snow shoes, a stream of tourists in sneakers and hiking boots sweated in temperatures of up to 57 degrees Fahrenheit last week. Some laughed about the “avalanche” warning signs that stuck out of the green grass in front of barren slopes.

Even though some lifts in the resort were still running, Geraldine Guironnet, 49, didn’t join her husband and son in their attempt to ski that day. She feared that after having been spoiled by excellent skiing conditions in the past, she wouldn’t have enjoyed sliding over the sparse snow cover that was left.

“I loved it,” she said of her walk. “You just have to adapt.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Military reports 247 UFO sightings
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/12/pentagon-military-personnel-report-least-247-ufo-s/
GIST	<p>U.S. military personnel reported 247 UFO sightings from March 2021 to August 2022, officials said in a major report released Thursday, and some of the objects “demonstrated unusual flight characteristics or performance capabilities” that cannot be explained.</p> <p>The latest report from the Pentagon’s All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) seems to mark a significant step forward in the government’s research of UFOs.</p> <p>Officials said the study makes clear that U.S. military personnel are less reluctant to come forward with their experiences than in years past, making it easier for the government to gather data on unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP).</p> <p>“AARO and ODNI assess that the observed increase in the UAP reporting rate is partially due to a better understanding of the possible threats that UAP may represent, either as safety of flight hazards or as potential adversary collection platforms, and partially due to reduced stigma surrounding UAP reporting,” the Pentagon and ODNI said in the report. “This increased reporting allows more opportunities to apply rigorous analysis and resolve events.”</p> <p>The study still contains troubling findings. Many of the sightings remain unexplained.</p> <p>In total, the report examines 366 UFO sightings — 247 from March 2021 to August 2022 and another 119 earlier that were reported or discovered afterward.</p>

Of the 366, officials said, 26 can likely be explained as drones. Another 163 were characterized as “balloon or balloon-like entities,” and six were attributed to “clutter.”

The remaining 171 lack a clear explanation.

“This initial characterization better enables AARO and ODNI to efficiently and effectively leverage resources against the remaining 171 uncharacterized and unattributed UAP reports,” the report said. “Some of these uncharacterized UAP appear to have demonstrated unusual flight characteristics or performance capabilities, and require further analysis.

“The majority of new UAP reporting originates from U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force aviators and operators who witnessed UAP during the course of their operational duties and reported the events to the [government’s UAP task force] or AARO through official channels,” the study said. “Regardless of the collection or reporting method, many reports lack enough detailed data to enable attribution of UAP with high certainty.”

The report was delivered to Congress on Wednesday, and some lawmakers praised the effort to bring the UFO issue to light.

“Today’s report reflects a step forward in understanding and addressing risks to aviators. Overall, I am encouraged to see an increase in UAP reporting — a sign of decreased stigma among pilots who are aware of the potential threat that UAPs can pose,” said Sen. Mark R. Warner, Virginia Democrat and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Officials said they have seen no instances of direct harm to U.S. personnel or assets from UFOs.

“UAP pose a safety of flight and collision hazard to air assets, potentially requiring aircraft operators to adjust flight patterns in response to their unauthorized presence in the airspace, operating outside of air traffic control standards and instruction,” the report reads in part. “To date, there have been no reported collisions between U.S. aircraft and UAP. Regarding health concerns, there have also been no encounters with UAP confirmed to contribute directly to adverse health-related effects to the observer(s).”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Heating up: 2022 5 th or 6 th warmest record
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/science/2022-was-fifth-or-sixth-warmest-on-record-as-earth-heats-up/
GIST	<p>DENVER (AP) — Earth’s fever persisted last year, not quite spiking to a record high but still in the top five or six warmest on record, government agencies reported Thursday.</p> <p>But expect record-shattering hot years soon, likely in the next couple years because of “relentless” climate change from the burning of coal, oil and gas, U.S. government scientists said.</p> <p>Despite a La Nina, a cooling of the equatorial Pacific that slightly reduces global average temperatures, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calculates 2022’s global average temperature was 58.55 degrees (14.76 degrees Celsius), ranking sixth hottest on record. NOAA doesn’t include the polar regions because of data concerns, but soon will.</p> <p>If the Arctic — which is warming three to four times faster than the rest of the world — and Antarctic are factored in, NOAA said it would be fifth warmest. NASA, which has long factored the Arctic in its global calculations, said 2022 is essentially tied for fifth warmest with 2015. Four other scientific agencies or science groups around the world put the year as either fifth or sixth hottest.</p> <p>NOAA and NASA records go back to 1880.</p>

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said global temperature is “pretty alarming ... What we’re seeing is our warming climate, it’s warning all of us. Forest fires are intensifying. Hurricanes are getting stronger. Droughts are wreaking havoc. Sea levels are rising. Extreme weather patterns threaten our well-being across this planet.”

Berkeley Earth, a nonprofit group of independent scientists, said it was the fifth warmest on record and noted that for 28 countries it was the hottest year on record, including China, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Germany and New Zealand.

Another group, whose satellite-based calculations tend to run cooler than other science teams, said it was the seventh hottest year.

Last year was slightly toastier than 2021, but overall the science teams say the big issue is that the last eight years, from 2015 on, have been a step above the higher temperatures the globe had been going through. All eight years are more than 1.8 degrees (1 degree Celsius) warmer than pre-industrial times, NOAA and NASA said. Last year was 2 degrees (1.1 degrees Celsius) warmer than the mid-19th century, NASA said.

“The last eight years have clearly been warmer than the years before,” said NOAA analysis branch chief Russ Vose.

In a human body an extra 2 degrees Fahrenheit is considered a fever, but University of Oklahoma meteorology professor Renee McPherson, who wasn’t part of any of the study teams, said the global warmth is actually worse than the equivalent of a planetary fever because fevers can be treated to go down quickly.

“You can’t take a pill for it so the fixes aren’t easy,” McPherson said. “It’s more what you consider a chronic illness like cancer.”

Like a fever, “every tenth of a degree matters and things break down and that’s what we’re seeing,” Climate Central Chief Meteorologist Bernadette Woods Placky.

The likelihood of the world shooting past the 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) warming threshold that the world adopted in 2015 is increasing with every year, said the World Meteorological Organization. The United Nations weather agency said the last 10 years average 1.14 degrees Celsius warmer than pre-industrial times. Vose said there’s a 50-50 chance of hitting 1.5 degrees Celsius temporarily in the 2020s.

Vose and NASA Goddard Institute of Space Studies Director Gavin Schmidt both said there are hints of an acceleration of warming but the data isn’t quite solid enough to be sure. But the overall trend of warming is rock solid, they said.

“Since the mid-1970s you’ve seen this relentless increase in temperature and that’s totally robust to all the different methodologies,” Schmidt said.

The La Nina, a natural process that alters weather worldwide, is in its third straight year. Schmidt calculated that last year the La Nina cooled the overall temperature by about a tenth of a degree (.06 degrees Celsius) and that last year was the hottest La Nina year on record.

“The La Nina years of today aren’t the La Nina years of yesterday,” said North Carolina state climatologist Kathie Dello. “Historically, we could rely on La Nina turning down the global thermostat. Now, heat-trapping gases are keeping the temperature cranked up, and handing us another top-10 warmest year on record.”

With La Nina likely dissipating and a possible El Nino on the way — which adds to warming — Schmidt said this year will likely be warmer than 2022. And next year, he said, watch out if there's an El Nino.

“That would suggest that 2024 would be the record warmest year by quite a large amount,” Schmidt said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Scientists say about 90% of the heat trapped by greenhouse gases goes into the upper 6,561 feet of the ocean (2000 meters), and figures released Wednesday show 2022 was another record year for ocean heat.

“There's a real good connection between the patterns of ocean warming, the stratification, and then the weather that we experience in our daily lives on land,” including stronger hurricanes and rising seas, said study co-author John Abraham of the University of St. Thomas.

In the United States, global warming first grabbed headlines when Schmidt's predecessor, climate scientist James Hansen, testified about worsening warming in 1988. That year would go on to be the record warmest at the time.

Now, 1988 is the 28th hottest year on record.

The last year that the Earth was cooler than the 20th century average was 1976, according to NOAA.

But scientists say average temperatures aren't what really affects people. What hits and hurts people are how the warming makes extreme weather events, such as heat waves, floods, droughts and storms worse or more frequent or both, they said.

“These trends should concern everyone,” said Cornell University climate scientist Natalie Mahowald, who wasn't part of the study teams.

WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas said in 2022 those extremes “undermined health, food, energy and water security and infrastructure. Large areas of Pakistan were flooded, with major economic losses and human casualties. Record breaking heat waves have been observed in China, Europe, North and South America. The long-lasting drought in the Horn of Africa threatens a humanitarian catastrophe.”

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HEADLINE	01/12 Exxon predicted global warming in 1970s?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/study-exxon-mobil-accurately-predicted-warming-since-1970s/
GIST	<p>DENVER (AP) — Exxon Mobil's scientists were remarkably accurate in their predictions about global warming, even as the company made public statements that contradicted its own scientists' conclusions, a new study says.</p> <p>The study in the journal Science Thursday looked at research that Exxon funded that didn't just confirm what climate scientists were saying, but used more than a dozen different computer models that forecast the coming warming with precision equal to or better than government and academic scientists.</p> <p>This was during the same time that the oil giant publicly doubted that warming was real and dismissed climate models' accuracy. Exxon said its understanding of climate change evolved over the years and that critics are misunderstanding its earlier research.</p> <p>Scientists, governments, activists and news sites, including Inside Climate News and the Los Angeles Times, several years ago reported that “Exxon knew” about the science of climate change since about 1977 all while publicly casting doubt. What the new study does is detail how accurate Exxon funded research was. From 63% to 83% of those projections fit strict standards for accuracy and generally predicted correctly that the globe would warm about .36 degrees (.2 degrees Celsius) a decade.</p>

The Exxon-funded science was “actually astonishing” in its precision and accuracy, said study co-author Naomi Oreskes, a Harvard science history professor. But she added so was the “hypocrisy because so much of the Exxon Mobil disinformation for so many years ... was the claim that climate models weren’t reliable.”

Study lead author Geoffrey Supran, who started the work at Harvard and now is an environmental science professor at the University of Miami, said this is different than what was previously found in documents about the oil company.

“We’ve dug into not just the language, the rhetoric in these documents, but also the data. And I’d say in that sense, our analysis really seals the deal on ‘Exxon knew,’” Supran said. It “gives us airtight evidence that Exxon Mobil accurately predicted global warming years before, then turned around and attacked the science underlying it.”

The paper quoted then-Exxon CEO Lee Raymond in 1999 as saying future climate “projections are based on completely unproven climate models, or more often, sheer speculation,” while his successor in 2013 called models “not competent.”

Exxon’s understanding of climate science developed along with the broader scientific community, and its four decades of research in climate science resulted in more than 150 papers, including 50 peer-reviewed publications, said company spokesman Todd Spitler.

“This issue has come up several times in recent years and, in each case, our answer is the same: those who talk about how ‘Exxon Knew’ are wrong in their conclusions,” Spitler said in an emailed statement. “Some have sought to misrepresent facts and Exxon Mobil’s position on climate science, and its support for effective policy solutions, by recasting well intended, internal policy debates as an attempted company disinformation campaign.”

Exxon, one of the world’s largest oil and gas companies, has been the target of numerous lawsuits that claim the company knew about the damage its oil and gas would cause to the climate, but misled the public by sowing doubt about climate change. In the latest such lawsuit, New Jersey accused five oil and gas companies including Exxon of deceiving the public for decades while knowing about the harmful toll fossil fuels take on the climate.

Similar lawsuits from New York to California have claimed that Exxon and other oil and gas companies launched public relations campaigns to stir doubts about climate change. In one, then-Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said Exxon’s public relations efforts were “reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s long denial campaign about the dangerous effects of cigarettes.”

Oreskes acknowledged in the study that she has been a paid consultant in the past for a law firm suing Exxon, while Supran has gotten a grant from the Rockefeller Family Foundation, which has also helped fund groups that were suing Exxon. The Associated Press receives some foundation support from Rockefeller and maintains full control of editorial content.

Oil giants including Exxon and Shell were accused in congressional hearings in 2021 of spreading misinformation about climate, but executives from the companies denied the accusations.

University of Illinois atmospheric scientist professor emeritus Donald Wuebbles told The Associated Press that in the 1980s he worked with Exxon-funded scientists and wasn’t surprised by what the company knew or the models. It’s what science and people who examined the issue knew.

“It was clear that Exxon Mobil knew what was going on,” Wuebbles said. “The problem is at the same time they were paying people to put out misinformation. That’s the big issue.”

There's a difference between the "hype and spin" that companies do to get you to buy a product or politicians do to get your vote and an "outright lie ... misrepresenting factual information and that's what Exxon did," Oreskes said.

Several outside scientists and activists said what the study showed about Exxon actions is serious.

"The harm caused by Exxon has been huge," said University of Michigan environment dean Jonathan Overpeck. "They knew that fossil fuels, including oil and natural gas, would greatly alter the planet's climate in ways that would be costly in terms of lives, human suffering and economic impacts. And yet, despite this understanding they choose to publicly downplay the problem of climate change and the dangers it poses to people and the planet."

Cornell University climate scientist Natalie Mahowald asked: "How many thousands (or more) of lives have been lost or adversely impacted by Exxon Mobil's deliberate campaign to obscure the science?"

Critics say Exxon's past actions on climate change undermine its claims that it's committed to reducing emissions.

After tracking Exxon's and hundreds of other companies' corporate lobbying on climate change policies, InfluenceMap, a firm that analyzes data on how companies are impacting the climate crisis, concluded that Exxon is lobbying overall in opposition to the goals of the Paris Agreement and that it's currently among the most negative and influential corporations holding back climate policy.

"All the research we have suggests that effort to thwart climate action continues to this day, prioritizing the oil and gas industry value chain from the "potentially existential" threat of climate change, rather than the other way around," said Faye Holder, program manager for InfluenceMap.

"The messages of denial and delay may look different, but the intention is the same."

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/13 Murder charge in Japan Abe assassination
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/shinzo-abe-japan-government-homicide-assassinations-8267d689b9f63d5461bddf4f880dddc3?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=TopNews&utm_campaign=posit ion_08
GIST	<p>TOKYO (AP) — Japanese prosecutors formally charged the suspect in the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with murder, sending him to stand trial, a court said Friday.</p> <p>Tetsuya Yamagami was arrested immediately after allegedly shooting Abe with a homemade gun as the former leader was making a campaign speech in July outside a train station in Nara in western Japan. He then underwent a nearly six-month mental evaluation, which prosecutors said showed he is fit to stand trial.</p> <p>Yamagami was also charged with violating a gun control law, according to the Nara District Court.</p> <p>Police have said Yamagami told them that he killed Abe, one of Japan's most influential and divisive politicians, because of Abe's apparent links to a religious group that he hated. In his statements and in social media postings attributed to him, Yamagami said he developed a grudge because his mother had made massive donations to the Unification Church that bankrupted his family and ruined his life.</p>

One of his lawyers, Masaaki Furukawa, told The Associated Press on Thursday that Yamagami will have to take responsibility for the serious consequences of his alleged actions and that his defense lawyers will do their best to reduce his sentence.

Japanese law allows capital punishment for murder, but experts say the death penalty usually is handed down for multiple killings and Yamagami could get life in prison if convicted.

No date is set for the trial, which is expected to have a panel of civil jurors in addition to the usual bench judges, as is typical in murder cases and other serious criminal trials in Japan. There are no pretrial hearings in Japan and defendants generally undergo trials.

Due to the complexity of the case, it will take months before his trial begins, Furukawa said.

Police are also reportedly considering adding several other allegations, including producing weapons, violating the explosives control law and causing damage to buildings.

In a country known for public safety and tight gun controls, the assassination led to the resignation of top local and national police chiefs and a tightening of security guidelines for political leaders and other prominent people.

“We must take very seriously the heinous act of violence that resulted in the death of former Prime Minister Abe,” Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said in response to Yamagami’s indictment.

He said Japan will ensure the safety of dignitaries and political leaders with the summit of the Group of Seven nations and nationwide local elections coming in the spring.

Some Japanese have expressed sympathy for Yamagami, especially those who also suffered as children of followers of the South Korea-based Unification Church, which is known for pressuring adherents into making big donations and is considered a cult in Japan.

Thousands of people have signed a petition requesting leniency for Yamagami, and others have sent care packages to his relatives or the detention center.

Kazuo Kobayashi, 64, a resident of Chiba near Tokyo, said Yamagami should face justice regardless of his difficult background.

“I think it’s good to bring him to justice and make clear what is right and what is wrong,” he said. “I want the case to be fully examined to find the truth in order to have a lesson for Japan’s future.”

The investigation into the case has led to revelations of years of cozy ties between Abe’s governing Liberal Democratic Party and the church since Abe’s grandfather, former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, helped the church take root in Japan in the 1960s over shared interests in conservative and anti-communist causes.

Current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s popularity has plunged over his handling of the church controversy and for insisting on holding a rare, controversial state funeral for Abe.

Kishida shuffled his Cabinet in August to remove ministers with church ties, but the subsequent release of an investigation by the governing party in September showed nearly half of its 400 national lawmakers had church connections.

Kishida, who said has no relations with the church, promised that party lawmakers will cut ties with the group, and his government has begun an investigation that could lead to a revocation of the church’s religious status.

	<p>The government also adopted a law designed to help victims of the church’s fundraising practices, though experts say the measure is insufficient.</p> <p>Yoshihiro Morishima, a 72-year-old resident of Yokohama, said the church has long been a social problem, and “I would prefer that it disappear at this point. It would be just what the suspect wanted, but that’s fine with me.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 ‘Help the officer’ mistake in Montlake
SOURCE	https://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2023/01/911-help-the-officer-mistake-in-montlake-first-hill-guitar-toting-burglar-standoff-skittle-fentanyl-pill-drug-bust/
GIST	<p>‘Help the officer’ mistake in Montlake: A mistaken “help the officer” dispatch brought a flood of Seattle Police officers to Montlake Blvd E at NE Pacific St early Thursday. According to SPD radio updates, police were called to help after a Washington State trooper was reported in a struggle with a suspect in the area around 2 AM. The “help the officer” protocol allows police to respond at high speeds when a member of law enforcement is reported threatened or in an altercation. Arriving units quickly located and stopped the described suspect but could not locate any trooper. SPD tells CHS the suspect was possibly in crisis and had been involved in an altercation and attempted to spit on a victim but the “help the officer” call was in error and no law enforcement was involved in the initial report. There were no reported injuries. The suspect was arrested to be booked for the assault.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Illegal tried to kill BP agent: sentenced 7yrs
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/12/illegal-immigrant-gets-7-year-sentence-attempted-m/
GIST	<p>An illegal immigrant who snuck into the U.S. earlier this year was slapped Thursday with a prison sentence of more than 7 years for trying to murder a Border Patrol agent.</p> <p>Rey David Marquez-Jimenez barreled into the agent, knocking him over, punched him, then straddled him and tried to get his gun and aim it at the agent. After the agent wrestled the weapon away, Marquez-Jimenez tried to gouge the agent’s eyes, then pulled out a knife and tried to slash the agent’s throat and stab his stomach.</p> <p>The agent was able to wrestle the knife away. Marquez-Jimenez then ran, but was tracked down and arrested.</p> <p>“Were it not for the agent’s physical endurance and prior military training, the defendant would have killed him,” prosecutors told the judge in urging a lengthy sentence.</p> <p>Marquez-Jimenez, 23, snuck into southeastern Arizona from Mexico on Jan. 26, 2022.</p> <p>His lawyer said he was seeking a better job and wasn’t coming for protection or to reunite with family. The lawyer called the attack a one-off incident that wasn’t in his client’s character.</p> <p>The lawyer said Marquez-Jimenez was actually trying to keep the agent’s firearm in its holster, fearing he would be shot.</p> <p>“He is truly remorseful,” the lawyer told the judge, asking for a five-year sentence.</p> <p>Prosecutors countered said it wasn’t even a case of resisting arrest that escalated.</p> <p>The agent had been trying to handcuff another migrant and Marquez-Jimenez could have used that opportunity to flee. Instead he launched a five-minute attack on the agent — all captured on a Border Patrol surveillance camera.</p> <p>Marquez-Jimenez admitted to the attack and pleaded guilty to attempted murder last year.</p>

	<p>He was one of more than 170,000 illegal immigrants nabbed by the Border Patrol in January 2022 — including nearly 56,000 illegal immigrants from Mexico.</p> <p>In a statement announcing the sentencing, Gary Restaino, the U.S. attorney in Arizona whose office prosecuted the case, said “most noncitizens who enter the United States do so peacefully, and with the intention of seeking a better life for their families.”</p> <p>He said his office would punish “the small number of undocumented aliens who ignore law enforcement commands and engage in aggressive behavior.”</p> <p>FBI Special Agent in Charge Akil Davis cast the attack as part of a broader wave of violence toward officers and agents.</p> <p>“This agent fought for his life while working to protect the American people and safeguard our borders. Assaults on law enforcement officials continue to occur and this is just one of the thousands that happened in 2022,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Boy shot, killed in Tacoma
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/boy-shot-and-killed-in-tacoma
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - A minor was killed in a shooting in Tacoma Thursday afternoon. Tacoma Police responded to reports of a shooting in the 4000 block of Portland Ave. E around 3 p.m.</p> <p>When officers arrived, they found a boy who had been shot. They worked on saving his life until paramedics could take him to the hospital.</p> <p>The boy later died at the hospital.</p> <p>Police have not released his age or what led up to the shooting.</p> <p>His death is being investigated as a homicide, but police have not released any suspect information.</p> <p>In a statement, Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards said:</p> <p>"This is a tragic day for Tacoma. Our hearts go out to the family and loved ones of the young male victim who was struck by gunfire this afternoon along Portland Avenue in East Tacoma. We offer our deepest condolences to his family and loved ones, as well as others grieving across our entire community. Although any loss of life is unacceptable, it is even more painful when we see a young life cut short. As we have stated in the past, we remain committed to working with our local, regional and national partners to reverse the alarming upward trend of violence that we have seen in recent years. While that may not be comforting in this moment, we must continue our efforts to address the root causes of these issues. The Tacoma Police Department has already begun working to identify, locate and apprehend the shooter, and they will share updates on this evolving situation as they become available."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Idaho murders: 5 key pieces of evidence
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/idaho-murders-5-key-pieces-of-evidence-against-bryan-kohberger
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Idaho - He is still only the accused – and must be considered innocent until proven guilty. But the case against Bryan Kohberger for the Idaho quadruple homicide appears strong.</p> <p>There remains much we don't know and there is much more investigation, and evidence, to come. But with the recent release of the arrest warrant affidavit, here's how the prosecution's evidence is stacking up.</p> <p>The knife sheath DNA</p>

Currently, this is the only evidence that is direct and not circumstantial. In the absence of the knife itself, [having a sheath that matches to the same knife that caused the wounds](#) (a fact which will need to be demonstrated), found literally beside the body of one of the victims, is going to be tough to refute.

Yes, as some have proposed, Kohberger could contend that someone stole or found his knife. Aside from being far-fetched, this is unlikely to persuade because this hypothetical person's handling of the Ka-Bar – through gripping, sweating, and perhaps even shedding his own blood – before and during the attacks would likely have obfuscated any DNA of Kohberger's. It is significant that the affidavit pointedly states that only "a single source of male DNA (Suspect Profile)" was found on the sheath.

And if the DNA on the knife was extracted from a splatter of Kohberger's own blood? Then even that weak defense goes out the window.

At this point, the DNA is the linchpin. It is no accident that the probable cause affidavit – which is written chronologically – concludes with the DNA match to Kohberger's father. It was at that point that the investigators knew it was time to take the case down.

The car videos

No license plate was obtained from the videos. Nonetheless, [Kohberger's car](#) not only matches the car make and model filmed near the scene, but it also coincides with the movement of his mobile phone before and after the murders. For instance, there is this sequence that occurs as the car is tracked leaving the scene, and after the Kohberger phone had apparently been turned off:

- 4:48 a.m.: Phone goes live again, on State Hwy 95, south of Moscow
- 4:50 – 5:26 a.m.: Phone travels south on Rt 95 to Genessee, ID, then west, then north back towards Pullman.
- 5:25 a.m.: Car on video at WSU, 1300 Johnson Rd, Pullman, in the vicinity of suspect's home
- 5:27 a.m.: Car on video at WSU along Stadium Way, vicinity of suspect's home
- 5:30 a.m.: Phone pings at the Kohberger home

Could Kohberger contend that it wasn't his car? Certainly. But why then would it exactly match the movements of his cell phone?

And now that the task force has the car, it may well yield further forensic evidence – no matter how hard he tried to clean it.

Digital phone forensics

Like the car, the pings Kohberger's phone sent to nearby cell towers are more circumstantial than direct. But taken with the movement of his car, this will be tough to refute.

Further, what possible reason could Kohberger give for his phone being in close proximity to the victims' house 12 times in the months leading up to the murders – 11 of those late at night?

Could he contend someone else had his phone? That would require him to identify this person (unlikely). Could he contend he lost the phone, or that it was stolen? Sure – but why didn't he report that and cancel it? And if so, how to explain that the phone's activity continued to fit the pattern of his own use (calling family, for instance)?

Or: Could he contend he was in that particular cell area, but not actually near the victims' house?

Aside from the fact that he would have to explain why in the middle of the night he was regularly in an area 10 miles from his home, there is this: According to a recent interview of Steve Goncalves, the father of victim Kaylee Goncalves, Kohberger at times was so close to the victims' house, his phone was picked up by their WiFi.

The eyewitness

Much has been made of Dylan Mortensen's delay in calling the police. What has been somewhat overlooked, however, is that her descriptions of his height, physique, and "bushy eyebrows" were all confirmatory as Kohberger became a suspect.

If you doubt that, consider this: On November 29th, roughly two weeks after the murders, two separate Washington State University campus police officers discovered Kohberger's car as a match to the Hyundai Elantra the task force was seeking. They or a task force member would next have looked at the license photo of the car's owner. Now ask yourself: Would Kohberger be in custody if Dylan had described him as 5' 3" and heavily overweight? And even if so, would the case be anywhere near as strong?

Dylan's description of the suspect's path when leaving the house also matches a latent footprint discovered at the scene – important evidence, if it's matched to Kohberger.

Kohberger's Internet postings

Without a clear motive – which may never be learned – the prosecution can introduce Kohberger's previous Reddit postings, in which he attempted to query criminals on what it felt like [to commit crimes](#), what steps they took to avoid capture, how they prepared, and so on – including the questions, "Why did you choose that victim or target over others?" and "How did you approach your victim or target?"

For their ending summation to a jury, prosecutors labor to construct a compelling narrative – a story that explains what the accused did and why he did it. Adding Kohberger's intense interest in criminality – and the creepy questions he had previously asked in his Reddit survey – suggests a possible motive in the possible absence of one come trial time.

As noted, there is much more investigation, and likely more evidence, to come (for instance, the steps Kohberger took post-murder, like wearing surgical gloves and hiding his garbage). There will also be a great deal of criminal procedure. And there is also the defense's case, glimpses of which may be gained during the discovery process (more on all that in a future article).

But at this writing, the task force appears to have done its job. Now, over to the prosecution.

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HEADLINE	01/12 Moscow suspect June preliminary hearing
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/crime/university-of-idaho-students-killed/moscow-idaho-murder-court-date/293-f9578e2e-f75f-40da-9e03-c758a01efff0
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Idaho — The man accused of murdering four University of Idaho students appeared in court Thursday morning for a status hearing. During that hearing, the suspect waived his right to a speedy preliminary hearing and the judge set a date for that hearing.</p> <p>28-year-old Bryan Kohberger remains in custody at the Latah County Jail. He is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and one count of first-degree burglary in relation to the deaths of Kaylee Goncalves, Ethan Chapin, Madison Mogen, and Xana Kernodle on Nov. 13.</p> <p>On Thursday, the suspect waived his right to a speedy preliminary hearing. The court also reserved the entire week of June 26, 2023, to present evidence as part of the preliminary hearing.</p> <p>The request for the June hearing was made by the suspect's attorney, Anne Taylor.</p> <p>As the defendant, the suspect has the right to have a preliminary hearing within 14 days of his first court appearance. However, waiving that right means the preliminary hearing can happen at any time.</p> <p>During the preliminary hearing, also referred to as a probable cause hearing, the state has the responsibility of proving that more likely than not, the suspect is the person who committed the murders.</p>

	<p>During the suspect's first appearance on Jan. 5, a Latah County judge ruled he would remain in jail without bail. He was also given a no-contact order that prohibits him from having any contact with the victims' families, friends and the surviving roommates.</p> <p>If the suspect pleads guilty or is found guilty, he faces the death penalty or life in prison.</p> <p>During the Jan. 5 hearing, the suspect was present with his public defender, Ann Taylor. Latah County Magistrate Megan Marshall informed him of his rights and read the charges against him.</p> <p>The state bears the burden of proving beyond a reasonable doubt that the suspect is responsible for the four murders. He is also eligible to have a preliminary hearing within 14 days of his first appearance.</p> <p>If probable cause is established during the preliminary hearing, the case will be transferred to Latah County District Court, at which point the suspect will be allowed to enter a plea of guilty, not guilty or no contest. A jury trial will also be set at that time.</p> <p>The suspect's preliminary hearing is scheduled for June 26, 2023 at 9 a.m. His arraignment has not yet been scheduled.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Police investigate shootings: 3 injured
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/police-investigating-after-2-injured-renton-shooting/KGVS65IDYFBNNLALAXYHN7CY24/
GIST	<p>Renton police are investigating after two men were injured in shootings on Thursday afternoon.</p> <p>According to police, an employee of a Kia car dealership on Southwest Grady Way was seriously injured in a shooting around 1:40 p.m. Police said the man was shot in a new part of the dealership's lot.</p> <p>The other shooting happened at a grocery store located at 64 Rainier Ave. just after 1 p.m. The male victim in that shooting suffered critical injuries, police said.</p> <p>The King County Sheriff's Office also confirmed a shooting in SeaTac just after 2 p.m. A man with multiple gunshot wounds was taken to an area hospital, authorities said. A spokesperson with the Renton Police Department said the incidents are connected.</p> <p>The suspect was taken into custody without incident. Police said there is no threat to the public.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Kent PD retail theft patrols net 8 arrests
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/retail-theft-emphasis-patrols-net-8-arrests-recovery-nearly-4000-merchandise-kent-target/O25WDIVJBFHT5JPV7EM3BBUZNE/
GIST	<p>Retail theft emphasis patrols at Target in Kent netted eight arrests and the recovery of nearly \$4,000 worth of stolen merchandise, the Kent Police Department announced Thursday.</p> <p>Police said it's the third time the department has collaborated with a store on retail theft operations in the past year.</p> <p>KPD said one suspect tried to run away but was unsuccessful. Many of the suspects who were arrested are repeat offenders, with some hitting stores for thousands of dollars of merchandise in one week several times.</p> <p>"We won't say where, and we won't say when, but we will be back at another location soon," the department said in its Facebook post.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/12 Seattle garage pipe bomb suspect arraigned
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/ibrahim-pipe-bomb-seattle-garage-pleads-not-guilty/281-57c75c6f-7b9f-4dc4-988e-f5f899341b52
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The man suspected of leaving a pipe bomb inside a Seattle parking garage was arraigned in a King County courtroom Thursday and pleaded not guilty.</p> <p>Osman Ibrahim was charged with possession of an explosive device and malicious placement of an explosive in the second degree last week.</p> <p>Ibrahim is being held on \$475,000 bail after charging documents say he placed a bomb in the garage at South 918 South Horton Street, which is near businesses, trails and transit.</p> <p>If the bomb went off, it "people could have been seriously injured or killed," charging documents state. Around 8 a.m. on Dec. 29, an employee of the building called 911 to report they found a metal pipe with what was described as having wires coming out of it, laying on a piece of clothing.</p> <p>The employees immediately recognized Ibrahim in security video from previous encounters involved in the building and had nicknamed him "hatchet" because he was usually carrying a hatchet, according to charging documents.</p> <p>Security video shows Ibrahim covering up a camera with a jacket on Dec. 26, and then removing the jacket. An item of clothing that wasn't in the background could then be seen in a corner on the ground.</p> <p>On Dec. 29, Ibrahim is again seen approaching and covering up the camera with a jacket - the item of clothing is still on the ground. Ibrahim uncovers the camera, and there is a "clearly visible" metal pipe device on the clothing, according to charging documents.</p> <p>While police were on scene, Ibrahim was seen passing by the scene on a bicycle and arrested. Ibrahim, according to charging documents, admitted to having been in the hallway/alcove of the garage and left the item behind because he had "no use for it."</p> <p>Members of the bomb squad removed the device and rendered it safe at a demolition range. The pipe measured 9 inches from end cap to end cap and 1.3 inches in diameter. The fuse "violently" burned when lit. The content of the pipe was measured at 97 grams and "reacted positively by burning, sparking, flashing, and reacting in a consistent manner for explosive materials," charging documents state.</p>
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